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“I’m not afraid to say that I want to achieve something with this:” Contemporary Art as Roma Activism in Budapest

CEERES Master’s Thesis

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Abstract

Roma experience in Hungary has been studied from a variety of perspectives. Many existing studies focus on marginalization, exclusion, socioeconomic stigma, and segregation to understand Roma as an identity category. A handful of others focus on Romani activism and resistance to the above challenges. Using postcolonial theory as a framework for explaining Romani identities, this dissertation investigates Roma contemporary art production as an activist tool in Budapest.

This research took a qualitative approach to gathering and analyzing visual and textual data to uncover relationships between Roma identities, art, and activism. By examining elements in Roma contemporary visual art and interviewing experts in culture/identity, art, and activism, it united two theoretical strands to understand how contemporary art production informs, reflects, or challenges Roma identities. It identified two major approaches to Roma activism, ethnonationalist and civil, and generated an understanding of the ways identities depicted in contemporary visual art support or complicate these approaches.

Analysis of the data found that contemporary visual art has been employed to communicate Romani identities in diverse, sometimes conflicting ways. These span a complete eschewal of Roma as a category within art, to a full embrace of Romani self-identity as a motif used to call attention to social issues. Artists' and activists' understanding of contemporary art as an activist tool often differ, but both refer to themes of decolonization, resistance, othering, diversity, and intersectionality in their work.

Keywords: Roma, Hungary, Budapest, contemporary art, activism, identity, resistance, postcolonial theory, intersectionality.

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Introduction

Ten years ago, an unnamed park in Budapest's 8th district was inaugurated as "Muzsikus Cigányok Parkja" or the "Gypsy Musicians' Park." Eight bronze plaques embossed on stone pillars in the park celebrate the contributions and legacies of Hungary's Gypsy musicians, in a testament to the enduring appreciation of Gypsy/Roma music in Hungary and its recognition as part of Hungary's cultural heritage (*Inauguration of the park of Fiddler Gypsies in Józsefváros*, 2013). Yet less than a half kilometer away, in Budapest's Mátyás Tér, the former Gallery8 Roma Contemporary Art Gallery remains inexplicably closed, the windows shuttered and the door secured with a bicycle u-lock. This tableau illustrates a dichotomy at the heart of Roma (or so-called "Gypsy") representation in Hungary. Roma heritage and culture may be celebrated publicly when remaining within the confines of non-Roma society's expectations of how Roma *should* be or what role they *should* fill. But projects that deviate from this uniform expectation are susceptible to precarious funding, less public support, and may even go unnoticed by those without a preexisting connection to Roma communities. This is not said to disparage the existence of a monument like the Muzsikus Cigányok Parkja. On the contrary, this musician heritage should be celebrated, but it should not stand in as a singular expression of "Romaness." In a country with approximately 700,000 Roma people (European Commission, n.d.), it would be fallacious to assume they all identify with "Gypsy Musicians," prompting me to wonder where the other representations of Roma people in Budapest may be. Although at the time of this research from September 2022 – March 2023 there were a few other examples of public Roma representation in Budapest, including the Roma Holocaust Memorial, the quiet closure of Gallery8 speaks volumes, and it is not unique.

This research emerged out of the need to address alternative pathways to forging identities and constructing modes of empowerment for Roma people in Budapest. After reviewing a wide body of literature, it revealed a saturation in scholarship about Roma segregation, marginalization, and stigmatization and identified a gap in scholarship explaining Romani resistance and empowerment. Within the smaller body of research dedicated to this topic, some studies touched on Roma activism and Roma art, but few united these two strands. The central aim of this

research, then, is to depict a fuller, more nuanced picture of identity-construction by understanding the relationship between Roma identification, contemporary art, and activist projects in Hungary. To broaden an understanding of these three related themes, I have sought answers to the following questions:

- How are Roma identities instrumentalized to advance activist initiatives?
- How does contemporary art production inform, reflect, or problematize these identities?
- Is "Roma contemporary art" a useful avenue for communicating and achieving activist objectives rooted in Romani identities?
- Is activism through contemporary art capable of facilitating bottom-up, diverse initiatives or does it remain confined to the realm of the elite?

As will be discussed later in this dissertation, a fifth important question emerged through the process of conducting this research:

- Is it even possible to discuss such a thing as "Roma contemporary art"?

Addressing these questions will yield crucial insights into the ways in which Romani identities have been forged from two different—sometimes conflicting—stances, illustrating the complexities of representation for activist goals. It will also shed light on how one mode of expression, like contemporary visual art, may support or complicate these dualistic identity constructions. Moreover, it aims to fill theoretical gaps by contributing to research which centers Romani agency, resistance, and the multidimensionality of identities in academic discourse, rather than discussing Roma experience in terms of marginality, victimhood, and oppression. Although the scope of this research was primarily limited to Budapest, a capital city, I acknowledge that contemporary art is being produced in other locations in Hungary, and practices may differ in various locales. The relatively short timeline of this research project made it necessary to focus on one specific location, but opportunities for researching contemporary art and identification practices in rural sites abound, as will be discussed in the conclusion of this thesis.

To address the above questions and issues, this dissertation is set up as follows. First, the literature review and theoretical framework chapter provides a brief overview of the current state of research on Roma in Hungary, highlighting the gaps to be filled in my dissertation. Section

two of this chapter then provides background information about Roma in Hungary to contextualize the need for exploring Romani activist projects and identification processes in more depth. This section devotes specific attention to many of the pressing social and economic concerns of Roma communities today, including segregation, exclusion, healthcare disparities, housing access, and educational outcomes. After establishing this context and justifying the need to clarify how identification processes can draw attention to these social concerns, section three provides a review of approaches to thinking through Romani identities, including Barth's approach to treating ethnicity as relational and postcolonial theoretical approaches which account for ideas of "othering," hegemonic representation, and intersectionality. Part four of this chapter explores the nexus of identity and activism, devoting particular attention to the Romani movement of the 1990s and 2000s and more recent approaches to Roma activism which rely on a civic understanding of Roma identities. Part five then brings the two theoretical strands of identities and activism together by discussing how they manifest in Roma contemporary art production. This section presents a brief review of the limited literature dedicated to this topic before arguing for the necessity in probing further into whether and how Roma contemporary art projects succeed in forging Romani activisms grounded in diverse representation and inter-group solidarity.

The methodology chapter then outlines my approach to gathering and analyzing two forms of data for this research. It outlines five major sources of Roma contemporary art that provided my primary source of data for visual and textual analysis and justifies a qualitative, interpretive approach to conducting and analyzing interviews as a secondary source of data. It discusses the benefits and limitations of expert interviews and visual/textual analysis as methods before attending to the issue of researcher reflexivity and briefly discussing ethical considerations.

Finally, my empirical findings and discussion chapter reiterates my methodology before using inductive coding to thematically analyze the visual art and interview data to provide answers to these questions. It is broken into three main sections to guide the discussion of research findings: recognition, reclamation, and resistance. Within each of these sections, the issues outlined in the literature review chapter are addressed by deriving meaning from various pieces of Roma contemporary art and Roma contemporary art projects, with specific focus on Budapest as a locus of art and identity production.

The dissertation concludes by briefly discussing the key findings and identifying potential avenues of future research. It is my hope that the research discussed herein makes a small contribution to the growing body of work which recognizes the need to generate a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of Romani identities and approaches to activism, shifting focus away from disparities and drawing attention to the many ways Roma identities can be a source of strength, solidarity, and empowerment.

I. From Barth to Contemporary Art: A theoretical background for examining shifting Romani identities and their instrumentalization in activism and art

1.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to provide an overview of the relevant theoretical and empirical literature examining identities and identification, modes of activism, and contemporary art production as they relate to Roma experience in Hungary. This study is undertaken in order to understand how identities are constructed and wielded to advance activist initiatives; ask how contemporary art production informs, reflects, or problematizes these identities; ask whether "Roma Contemporary Art" is a useful avenue for communicating and achieving activist objectives rooted in Romani identities; and, finally, determine whether activism through contemporary art is capable of facilitating bottom-up, diverse initiatives or whether activism produced through art is confined to the realm of the elite.

To begin an investigation that addresses these questions, I will first provide a brief review of the most prolific areas of research on Roma in Hungary before giving background on the social and economic context of Hungary's Romani communities. I will then outline the main scholarly sources on identifying and classifying Roma as a distinct (or fluid) ethnic category within the historical, social, and political context that warrants discussion of Roma identities in the first place. After critiquing Barth's theory of identification as a model for discussing Roma identities, I will ground my analysis of Roma identification in a postcolonial theoretical framework in order to highlight agency, diversity, and intersectionality in research concerning Roma subjects. I will then review some of the key texts on Roma identification through this framework and proceed with a discussion of two distinct approaches to Roma activism in modern Europe, demonstrating a duality in how Roma identities are constructed and instrumentalized to enact change. Finally, I will briefly outline the state of Roma contemporary art today before concluding with an analysis of contemporary art as a tool for communicating complex, fluid identities within the context of activist discourse. Applying the duality of the approaches to Roma activism to a study on contemporary art as one distinct form of activism will unite two theoretical strands to generate insight into contemporary art's capacity as a political tool for addressing social issues and

enacting positive change. The insights gleaned from this research will elucidate a path forward for integrating modern Roma identities within activist narratives that utilize contemporary art to draw attention to pressing social issues.

1.2 Current state of research

A review of the available literature on Roma in Hungary reveals a twofold need for addressing contemporary Roma identification and its political, social, and economic significance. First, a wide body of literature is dedicated to exploring issues related to marginality, namely through the lens of education in/access (Kende & Neményi, 2006; Messing, 2017), healthcare disparities (Kelen et al., 2011; Orton et al., 2022), housing inequalities (Creţan et al., 2020; Zsolt Farkas et al., 2017), employment discrimination (Messing & Beremányi, 2017), and exclusion and stigmatization (Powell & Lever, 2017; Szalai & Zentai, 2014). These studies highlight the harsh socioeconomic conditions under which many Roma individuals, families, and communities live in Hungary.

Second, researchers point out the need for scholarship that goes beyond discussions of Roma discrimination, exclusion, and subordination to instead frame Roma as "active shapers of tactics and strategies of resistance and escape" (Ivasiuc, 2020b, p. 130). Studies in this vein are fewer but fill important gaps, often by centering Roma voices, rethinking power relations at the core of Romani activism, or problematizing research on Roma as a social or ethnic category. Scholars taking this approach examine victimhood narratives (Ivasiuc, 2020b), incongruities between activists and locals (Fosztó, 2020), Roma youth mobilization (Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2020), Roma migration and resistance (Clavé-Mercier & Olivera, 2018), intersectional feminist alliances (Biţu & Vincze, 2012; Corradi, 2021), and Roma resilience and cultural heritage (György & Oláh, 2018). This study will be placed in conversation with several of these studies to explore contemporary art creation as a specific form of activism and a means of identity construction initiated by people who identify as Roma in Hungary.

1.3 Identity and identification: Who are the Roma?

The concepts of identity and identification warrant discussion for several reasons. Identity can yield insights into an individual's relationship to their membership within an ethnic group, including a sense of pride and attachment (Umaña-Taylor, 2015), and feelings of identity may

also promote coping mechanisms against identity-related stressors (Spencer and Markstrom-Adams, 1990). The study of identity, and specifically ethnic identity, has changed greatly in the last few decades to encompass concepts such as self-identification choice, positive feelings, and cognitive development in relation to ethnic identification (Bernal et al., 1990). These are important to highlight within this research study because they demonstrate that ethnic identity has largely been studied in terms of its positive effects on the self-identity of individuals. With this in mind, this current research study is undertaken in an effort to further probe how identity is constructed, understood, and wielded in a positive sense by an ethnic group facing multiple threats of marginalization. Marginality is understood here in the sense summarized by Ashcroft et al. (2013), meaning that it highlights the "limitations of a subject's access to power" in structures which give power to those at the "center" and oppress or exclude those at the peripheries or the "margins" (p. 151).

1.3.1 Terminology

Before proceeding with a discussion of identity in the context of Roma communities, three key terms must be clarified. Majtényi and Majtényi (2016) point out that the terminology used to discuss Roma/Gypsies is "never neutral in terms of the creation of identity and referential knowledge related to identity" (p. 9). Although, in practice and daily life, the terms Roma and Gypsy may both be used self-referentially (Gheorghe, 2013), since 1989/1990 in the Central and Eastern European region the term "Roma" has been used in discourse to "signify a new cohort of educated, European Roma, with positive identity markers," (Majtényi & Majtényi, 2016, p. 9) and is moreover the result of political activism (Vermeersch, 2006). The term "Gypsy" may still be used pejoratively (McGarry, 2017) or to signify Roma as an ethnic or social group designated as "outsiders" (Majtényi & Majtényi, 2016, p. 9). Given that this research deals with issues related to contemporary identity, activism, and art, and that I approach this research as a non-Roma "outsider," I will use the terms "Roma" and "Romani" exclusively, except in cases where the term "Gypsy" is used by a source being directly quoted. The issue of researcher reflexivity as a non-Roma researcher conducting research on/with Roma is attended to in more detail in my methodology chapter.

When discussing and analyzing issues related to identity and identification, I use the plural "identities" because Roma do not constitute a single clearly defined, consolidated, or

homogenous ethnic or social group. Roma identities are as much a construction of "majority" interpretation as they are self-ascribed notions of belonging. Referring to "identities" in the plural, then, captures "the competing articulations of group identity and remind[s] us of the role of different actors in building up an understanding of Roma communities" (McGarry, 2017, p. 27).

In line with Majtényi and Majtényi's approach, I will place the term "majority" in quotation marks when referring to non-Roma members of society to acknowledge the fraught nature of distinguishing "Roma" from "majority" in mutually exclusive terms (2016, p.13). Roma experience is just as much a part of Hungary's history as the experience of non-Roma Hungarians, and moreover people may identify as both Roma and Hungarian (Messing, 2014). So, while I will use the terms "Roma" and "majority" for the sake of clarity and brevity, it is important to bear in mind that these are not mutually exclusive or fixed categories.

1.3.2 Context

While one single definition of "Roma" is impossible to locate, as I will discuss below when reviewing the scholarship on identification, some context on the historical, political, and social environment of Roma in Hungary is needed to ground this study.

Roma in Central and Eastern Europe are thought to have originated in India and migrated to Europe sometime between the 11th and 12th centuries (Hancock, 2010, pp. 11-12). Although this origin story can be traced to 18th century studies conducted by social scientists from "majority" society and has, moreover, been highly contested and debated (Hancock, 2010), it is important to point out that it has since been taken as fact by both national states and Roma themselves seeking to consolidate an organized political identity. The first articulation of a unified Roma identity occurred in 1971 at the first World Romani Congress, where delegates declared one Roma nation comprised of people from various Roma groups. Roma communities and churches cooperated with the government of India to organize this event at which a Roma flag and anthem were adopted (Majtényi & Majtényi, 2016, p. 3).

This unification attempt followed centuries of Roma migration and experiences of violence including enslavement (Amnesty International, n.d.; Gheorghe, 2013), genocide during the Holocaust or *Porrajmos* (Hancock, 1995), forced or coerced sterilization as recently as the 1990s

(Council of Europe, 2013), and murder at the hands of right-wing extremist groups (Bíro, 2013). Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, broader Hungarian society was also undergoing an ethnogenesis informed by opposition to the ruling Habsburg monarchy, the loss of territory and population after World War I, and the burgeoning role of culture in maintaining a distinct language, folk customs, and national character (Csepeli & Örkény, 1996, pp. 251-252). Thus, it is important to note that Roma identity as a minority identity within but distinct from the Hungarian "nation" was shaped not only by exclusion and violence but by Hungarian nationalism which emphasized culture and ethnicity as political tools.

Despite efforts to consolidate a transnational Roma identity on ethnopolitical grounds more than 50 years ago, Roma remain among the most marginalized populations in Europe. In Hungary specifically, where Roma account for anywhere between 3-8 per cent of the total population (European Commission, 2020; Kelen et al., 2011), statistics depict a stark socioeconomic situation. Latest estimates reveal that nearly 16 per cent of Roma aged 15-64 had not completed primary school, while 63 per cent had only basic qualifications, and approximately two thirds of Roma young people aged 18-24 were classified as "early school leavers" (European Commission, 2020, p. 7). Housing data show that Roma households have severely lagged behind the average regarding basic amenities, with one third of Hungary's Roma population living in dwellings without running water and nearly half in dwellings with another quality issue, like a leaking roof. Just under half (48 per cent) of the Roma population live in income poverty and 56 per cent live with severe material deprivation, meaning families struggle to cover housing costs or adequately heat their homes (ibid, p. 29). While healthcare access remains an issue across Hungary for both Roma and non-Roma people living in deprived areas, evidence also shows that regions lacking general practitioners and other basic healthcare services align with those with the highest concentrations of Roma (ibid., p. 49). In Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county, a study on Roma health status revealed a fourfold prevalence of cancer, stroke, and cardiovascular diseases and a tenfold prevalence of heart disease than the national average (Kelen et al., 2011, p. 343). Overall, Roma life expectancy is ten years lower than Hungary's average (ibid., p. 341).

1.3.3 Identification

Clarifying processes of (self)identification will help to situate an analysis of Roma activism which uses contemporary art to combat, draw attention to, and reduce the marginal social, political, and economic position of Roma outlined above.

Several researchers highlight the importance of distinguishing between identification as a process imposed by "outsiders" or non-Roma "majority" society in an attempt to define and categorize Roma as an ethnic group, and identification as a process negotiated by Roma themselves to consolidate political, national, community, linguistic, and/or self-identities (Gheorghe, 2013; Majtényi & Majtényi, 2016; McGarry, 2014; McGarry, 2017; Messing, 2014; Surdu, 2016). To understand and clarify these dual processes, I briefly discuss how Fredrik Barth's definition of identity has been adapted by various scholars of Romani studies below before arguing instead for a postcolonial approach to understanding Roma identities which accounts for Roma origins, histories, plurality of experiences, and current socioeconomic position in society.

1.3.3.1 Barth and identity dissonance

Fredrik Barth's (1969) definition of identity provides scope for conceptualizing ethnic identity as relational, interdependent, and produced through inter-group processes of inclusion and exclusion (pp. 9-10). This approach has been particularly salient within scholarship conducted on Roma by non-Roma researchers. The interpretation of Roma identities through Barth's anthropological lens asserts that Roma identities are forged through relations to non-Roma society. Here, the fluid nature of borders which separate social and ethnic groups ultimately determines group identity and its social and cultural significance (Barth, 1969; Majtényi & Majtényi, 2016). It is important to acknowledge that this framework has some utility, as it allows researchers scope to avoid essentializing and to highlight the subjective, fluid nature of identity and the process of identification. It is, however, still limiting.

Barth relies only on characterization of Roma identities in terms of their marginality. According to Barth, Roma (or "culturally foreign gypsies"), inhabit an "extreme form of minority position" as a "pariah group" which is "actively rejected by the host population" (Barth, 1969, p. 31). This theoretical approach, while applied by some scholars to analyze the position of Roma in Europe (Barany, 2002; Formoso & Burrell, 2000) has, therefore, received criticism from others investigating Roma identification. Majtényi and Majtényi (2016), for example, while

acknowledging the utility of Barth's framework, also critique it for ignoring marginality's historically determined dimension (p. 2). This means that unequal power dynamics are often overlooked for the sake of emphasizing traditional cultural elements of Roma identities. While it is true that, throughout their history in Europe, "majority" society did occasionally confer status onto Roma communities who were valued for their traditional crafts and musical abilities, treating these relations as the only explanation for Roma identity construction ignores the social pressures that in many ways restricted the livelihoods of individuals of Romani background. In turn, when traditional customs ceased to be a source of solidarity due to assimilation policies, Roma communities were forced to grapple with the loss of one source of identity, which heightened their marginal social position (ibid). Since Roma identities have not been constructed solely through their position as marginal within "majority" society, Barth's framework has a number of disadvantages.

A key issue with Barth's approach to understanding identities is the dissonance that arises in a "majority's" formulation of Roma identity and Roma self-identity. Several studies depart from the understanding that, if identity formation is to be viewed in relational terms, identification of Roma by "majority" society and self-identification among Roma themselves is often mismatched. But these researchers nonetheless make use of this dissonance to further develop ideas of identification processes within the social, historical, and political contexts that have contributed to identity production.

György Csepeli and Dávid Simon (2004), critiquing sociological models of identity that rely on Roma-"majority" relations, like Barth's, attribute this mismatch between the "Gypsy-image of the majority population and the self-image of the Roma" (p. 129) to several factors including historical policies, discourse and media representations, and classification struggles. State policies during the 18th and 19th century empires and the 19th century Hungarian nation-state either ignored the presence of Roma (Csepeli & Simon, 2004) or sought to assimilate Roma via a "civilizing mission" which targeted Roma as "'new Hungarians' or 'new peasants'" and prohibited the use of the Romanes language, the wearing of traditional clothing, and even marriage and child custody among Roma (Trehan & Kóczé, 2009, p. 52). Under state socialism during the 20th century, political and social programs were implemented in an attempt to forcibly assimilate Roma. These had varying degrees of success, for example, in improving employment

rates and social and economic security (Gheorghe & Mirga, 2001). In the newly forged democracies of the late 20th and 21st centuries, superficially implemented measures at further integration led to the loss of identity and the tendency of Roma "to identify themselves as non-Roma" (Csepeli & Simon, 2004, p. 132).

Public discourse about Roma and media representations of Roma also complicate the "majority"/self-perceptions of Roma by reinforcing stereotypes and negative representations held by "majority" society (Csepeli & Simon, 2004, p. 134). An analysis of Hungarian mainstream media coverage of Roma revealed an increased representation of Roma as criminals in mainstream Hungarian political discourse since 1993, while visuals associated with news reports about Roma reinforced stereotypes held by "majority" society and contributed to further interethnic distance (Bernath & Messing, 2013).

Finally, the struggle of politicians and "experts" to classify Roma has left little room for self-identification of the group they have attempted to classify. At times classified as a nationality, an ethnic group, a cultural group, a race, or a social class, Roma voices are, by and large, left out of the discussions (Csepeli & Simon, 2004, p. 136). Moreover, attempts by "experts" to categorize Roma based on objective criteria are often revealed to be subjectively determined by the classifier (Surdu, 2015). This has led to a lasting dissonance between outsider identification and self-identification of Roma.

Aidan McGarry (2014) concurs, calling the views of Roma held by "majority" society "representations." He argues that the multiple representations of Roma group identity are problematic for two primary reasons: first, the associations ascribed by non-Roma to Roma as a group identity are overwhelmingly negative, and second, Roma lack effective formal representation in public life to challenge these dominant (and on the whole, negative) understandings of Roma identity. He distinguishes between representation *of* Roma as "the construction of Roma identity and how they are seen and understood" and representation *for* Roma as "the capacity of Roma to articulate their voice, make demands and control dominant images of themselves" (McGarry, 2014, p. 757).

Majtényi and Majtényi point to the "environment of prejudice and discrimination" as a key contributing factor in the struggle for Roma classification (2016, p. 17). They hold that discrimination makes it difficult for people to adopt a Roma self-identity, and that

generalizations about Roma from outsiders, including researchers, may reinforce stereotypes which, in turn, makes free identity choice impossible (ibid). Sociologists, anthropologists, and historians attempting to understand, define, classify, and contextualize Roma identities are cautioned against inadvertently essentializing and homogenizing Roma identities in seeking to locate a "'Romani voice'" in their research (McGarry, 2014, p. 759), rendering necessary fresh theoretical approaches which take into account Roma subjectivity, the plurality of Roma experiences, and the role of "othering" in identity maintenance.

As this section has demonstrated, the major pitfall in Barth's framework for describing and analyzing Roma identities is the lack of inclusion of self-identity conceptualizations from Roma perspectives. Without this critical perspective, researchers risk perpetuating an understanding of Roma individuals and communities which elides the diverse character of Roma identities and experiences. Ignoring Roma voices also runs the risk of replicating the negative connotations ascribed to this group by "majority" society. Approaches that include Roma perspectives by giving agency to Roma subjects clarify identity's complex, multidimensional character and produce models of representation that challenge dominant hegemons.

1.3.3.2 Postcolonial approaches for conceptualizing Roma identities

Postcolonial theoretical approaches aim to understand power dynamics and resistance within the political, historical, and social context of colonialism. Nidhi Trehan and Angéla Kóczé argue that the post-socialist Central and East European region can be considered a "colonized space marked by the profound influence of global capitalist forces based in western capitals, and by the academic and institutional hegemony of the west" (2011, p. 56). Moreover, they conceive of "colonialism" in this context not as a single, specific instance of conquest but rather as "an ongoing exercise of economic, military and political power by stronger states and groups over weaker ones" at one level, and at the next level accounting for "subaltern classes" comprising "'infrahuman'" human subjects within those societies (Trehan & Kóczé, 2011, p. 57). Postcolonial theoretical approaches that account for concepts such as othering, hegemony, and intersectionality make this framework not only an appropriate tool for analysis but a necessary perspective for examining Roma identities. In defining ways to give agency to subaltern subjects, postcolonial approaches also provide a path forward for rethinking the terms used by non-Roma outsiders to define Roma communities.

"Othering" refers to the process in which a group of people are defined as fundamentally different from those in the "majority" culture or society (Spivak, 1985). Through "othering," a dominant or majority culture excludes and marginalizes a non-dominant or minority culture in order to legitimize power relations that maintain a position of superiority for the majority while relegating the minority to a position of inferiority. Edward Said (1978) discusses "othering" as a process which both creates hierarchies and represses the agency of the "other" by portraying them as uncivilized, primitive, or exotic.

For centuries, Roma subjects have been depicted in dominant narratives, media, and art as primitive, exotic, and in need of civilizing through colonial intervention. Kapralski argues that the arrival of Roma to Europe at precisely the time when modernization and colonial expansion were commencing had the "fatal consequence" of rendering Roma "'internal savages', treated like people subjected to colonial domination" (2021, p. 59). Costache, researching at the intersection of race, ethnicity, and identity construction/performance, extends this concept to modern Roma experience by arguing that Roma function as the "'Other' against which European identity crystallized," and that Roma identity forms the "'constitutive outside'" of European whiteness (2018, p. 41). Roma people can, she argues, engage in a process of "'resignification'" by reclaiming "Romani-ness," and that doing so will both "reveal the fictitious nature of dominant norms" and challenge the "hegemonic universality of whiteness" (Costache, 2018, p. 41).

Kóczé connects processes of othering to Roma experiences of migration from Eastern European countries to those in Western Europe. Representations of Roma as "other" center around themes including skin color and perceived bodily differences (Kóczé, 2018) and cultural discourses which present Roma as inherently lazy (Kóczé & Trehan, 2009; Kóczé, 2018). She further argues that a "racialized regime of representation" concretizes a subjugated position of Roma in European society and essentializes Roma experience (Kóczé, 2018, p. 460). Extending the notion of otherness beyond national borders into an international discussion of migration within Europe, Kóczé references Stuart Hall's notion of "Us" and "Them" (Hall, 1997, p. 258) to describe the ways discursive practices around migration within the European Union (EU) construct a dichotomy between Roma migrants and white migrants (Kóczé, 2018, p. 460). This dichotomy complicates the ways in which Roma migrants are treated as a single, homogenous group

("Them") when migrating from one EU country to another. Nicolae Gheorghe uses the example of Roma migrants from Romania, former Yugoslavia, and the Balkans to Italy to discuss the differential treatment Roma migrants receive based on their classification under the singular label of *nomadi*. This label at once misconstrues and simplifies the diverse national backgrounds, modes of living, and socioeconomic circumstances of Roma migrants, reducing them to the status of "nomads" and prompting policymakers to provide them with camp accommodations based on assumptions about their itinerant lifestyles (Gheorghe, 2013, p. 67). Misperceptions about who Roma are, based on a false binary which simplifies all Roma experience to an "other" or "them" category, therefore has material consequences for the opportunities available to integrate to new states as European migrants.

Bíro (2013) disagrees that Roma may be construed as postcolonial subjects due to the absence of an experience of colonization akin to that in postcolonial African societies, for example. He nevertheless applies ideas advanced by postcolonial thinkers such as Frantz Fanon to explain Roma populations' position as the "other" in Central and East European societies. Bíro locates a fundamental reason for Roma othering in their itinerant lifestyles throughout history, arguing that the Roma's lack of ties to land as peasants or landowners positioned them as distinct from local populations of settled societies. Referring to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1965), Bíro further argues that the process of having a "dominant alien culture" imposed on Roma for centuries has led to identity "syndromes" (Bíro, 2013, p. 22) complicated by a history of adapting to but never fully integrating within various societal changes. In other words, "majority" societies' attachment to land as an intrinsic part of their identities has maintained a hegemon in which Roma members of society have been unable to integrate without abandoning a fundamental part of their historical identity as a mobile population.

Hegemony also helps to explain the ways the dominant or "majority" culture represents and controls the narratives told about Roma which maintain their position as an inferior "other." I refer to hegemony in the sense employed by Antonio Gramsci to explain how the ruling class successfully promotes its own interests in society. Gramsci argues that the ruling class—in this case "majority" society—maintains their position of power over other classes by convincing them that "majority" interests are universal interests (Gramsci, 1988, 1991). This relegates Roma

to the position of a subaltern class, with less power to control their own representation and with no place in the "official" history of a given society (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 52-54).

Costache conceptualizes the idea of hegemonic representation within a discussion of Roma identities and power. The process of "resignification" mentioned above also has the power to highlight the performativity and arbitrary nature of the hegemonic power ascribed to "majority" identities over minority ones (Costache, 2018, p. 41). Referencing Foucault's idea of counterhistories (Foucault, 1997), Costache argues for the necessity of locating counterhistories of Roma to "insurrect hegemonic history," tell a continuous and heterogenous history, and advance a movement of increased political representation of Roma rooted in Roma solidarity and the struggle for social justice (Costache, 2018, p. 42). Challenging hegemony from the position of subalternity (from "the margins") allows room to question the ways identities are constructed and maintained, and as such, provides scope for understanding Roma identities in the broadest sense, inclusive of all intersecting identities Roma may hold (Costache, 2018). This reconsideration is important, as it provides a clear path for moving depictions of Roma away from the "representations" discussed by McGarry to instead treat Roma identities, histories, and stories as complex and diverse. As this study will later show, diversity is central to the ways Roma identities and self-identification are instrumentalized via artistic depictions to harness contemporary art's activist potential.

Another concept elaborated within postcolonial theory is the role of intersectionality in identity formation. Intersectionality highlights the multiple, intersecting identities that inform both an individual's sense of self—including class, gender, ethnicity, race, and socioeconomic status—and the ways oppressions rooted in these categories may overlap or "intersect" to compound one another (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality offers a comprehensive framework for theorizing hegemonic power relations (Fremlova, 2018) and is, thus, useful to apply to understand Roma identities for two main reasons. First, marginalization often occurs on multiple identity levels, as Roma may be excluded due to perceived ethnic or racial characteristics (McGarry, 2014) as well as for socioeconomic status. Margit Feischmidt, in researching villages in rural southwestern Hungary, found that economic success among Roma was not a guarantor of social acknowledgement among non-Roma peers, indicating the multiple levels of identity upon which exclusionary practices operate (Feischmidt, 2012).

Second, in terms of Roma activism, recent attention has been given to the importance of representing Roma experiences as diverse, and Roma individuals as complex and multifaceted, in order to further challenge hegemonic representation which simplifies, stereotypes, or erases the depth of Roma experience. Nicoleta Bițu and Enikő Vincze (2012) look to the intersections of gender and Romani identity in working toward a "Romani feminism" with the capacity to shape a movement for Roma women, build bridges between Roma women and "majority women," and construct a "modern Roma identity" that "considers diversity and equality within Roma communities and … addresses all the problems Roma women are subjected to at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and class" (pp. 45-46). Daniel Baker, self-identifying as both "Gay" and "Gypsy" (2015, p. 87), has conducted research at the intersection of ethnicity and sexuality to draw parallels in the experiences of queer people and Roma people and explore the themes that emerge for those who identify as both queer and Roma. These include invisibility, stigma, and passing as means of managing both Roma and gay identities. In this context, Baker points out the heightened significance of migration for gays and lesbians of Roma background due to their "extreme" position of marginality (Baker, 2015, p. 91). These studies reveal the importance of applying intersectionality to understand the ways different oppressions may compound off of one another and, importantly, how broader social movements may be applied to critically address issues within (though not exclusive to) Roma communities, like domestic violence (Cemlyn et al, 2009). They also reveal the importance of an intersectional approach to inform new pathways of liberation and resistance that reach beyond Roma identity groups as activists locate solidarity with non-Roma peers.

Postcolonial theoretical approaches to understanding identities provide a framework for conceiving of Roma identities, histories, experiences, and voices in the plural. Challenging hegemonic representation allows for an understanding of identity that is "as multifarious diverse, and inclusive … as possible in order to take into account the multifarious, plural and diverse histories of the subjects it represents" and promotes a "historical canon as diverse as the constituents of that history" (Costache, 2018, pp. 39-40). The next section will depart from this pluralistic understanding to take an in-depth look at the ways Roma identities are constructed, maintained, and instrumentalized to advance various activist projects. The concepts of postcolonial theory will aid in understanding the uses and applications of both heterogenous and homogenous identity constructions for advancing certain activist objectives.

1.4 The nexus of identity and activism

"I decided at a certain moment of my life that I am a Rom, although I was not necessarily obliged to be. Activism meant an opportunity to come to terms with the meaning and heritage of being ţigan*. To relieve the tensions that went along with using this category, I affirmed my social and cultural background and projected it on to Roma social history and culture."* Nicolae Gheorghe, Romani Human Rights Activist, from his essay "Choices to be Made and Prices to be Paid" (Gheorghe, 2013, pp. 49-50)

In a study exploring Romani women's activism through frameworks of critical race theory, intersectionality, and a critique of neoliberalism, Daróczi et al. (2018) discuss the nexus between identities and Romani activisms to highlight several ways in which identity influences activism and activism influences identity. Their findings indicate that a strong sense of Romani identity informs activists' commitment to and motivation toward challenging injustices. Their understanding of activism takes several forms, including movements through the arts and artists' roles, policy advocacy, and mobilization efforts which challenge injustice or promote social transformation (Daróczi et al., 2018, p. 84). This section utilizes Daróczi et al.'s findings to frame the following discussion of the ways Roma activisms have emerged and been sustained, primarily since 1989. Doing so will clarify two major approaches to activism within a broader "Romani movement" and then apply these dual approaches to thinking through art production as a specific form of activism.

The idea of a specifically "Roma activism" is almost as contested as the idea of Roma identity itself. While activism by, for, and with people who may be considered Roma is, on the whole, acknowledged as a necessity for combatting social inequalities, some scholars caution that activist projects meant to emancipate often result in paternalistic practices or, at worst, replicate the exclusionary structures they aim to eradicate (Rostas et al., 2015; Acton & Ryder, 2015). Even so, since the post-1989 changes brought about with the collapse of socialism in Central and Eastern Europe, Roma activism has strengthened into a diverse, deep, European-wide social movement. Romani leaders have used ethnic mobilization and the pursuit of common interests and collective action to defend and promote Roma rights as human and minority rights. They have, moreover, attempted to redefine and construct a Roma identity, rejected the stigma attached

to being Roma, and sought widespread emancipation of Roma across Europe (Gheorghe & Mirga, 2001).

The position of Roma as a collective in Europe is unique. On the one hand, their position as a "European minority" is relatively new, having emerged in the aftermath of state socialism. On the other, despite this recent classification, no other minority in Europe has been targeted to such an extent by large-scale, state-sponsored development projects, international development programs, and a broad array of civil society initiatives as the Roma (van Baar, 2020). At the core of European Roma activism is the adoption of "Roma" as an identifier wielded as a positive or neutral marker, connecting individuals to a political movement and attempting to erase social stigmas (Majtényi & Majtényi, 2016, p. 12). Trehan and Kóczé point out that this "collective political consciousness among diverse groups of Roma" is a direct response to rising xenophobia and hostility (2011, p. 54), and is thus created, in part, by the oppressive structures it seeks to eradicate through collective movement. Although nominally united, in the decades since 1989, the "Romani movement" (Gheorghe & Mirga, 2001) has been marked by competing visions of what Roma activism should look like, how projects should be undertaken, who should be involved, and what objectives should be reached.

In the following, I will utilize Nicolae Gheorghe's framework for discussing two distinct avenues through which Roma activism constructs identities to advance its goals. The first employs ethnonationalism to recognize Roma as a European entity. The ethnonationalist approach is foregrounded in the efforts of post-1989 Romani elites and implemented, for the most part, by the various political and social projects constructed from above and located in institutions like international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and governmental bodies. The second approach to Roma mobilization is a civic paradigm which focuses on activist initiatives that support civic associations and functions primarily at the local rather than international, European level.

I will discuss the ways both approaches to Roma activist initiatives harness, forge, maintain, problematize, or deconstruct Roma identities to enact change. This discussion will engage with some of the critiques that have been put forth to debate the merits of upholding a cohesive Roma identity to advance the goals of activist projects. It will also discuss various theoretical approaches to understanding how activism rooted in community development acknowledges the

diverse nature of Roma identities, experiences, and histories to forge a political movement grounded in heterogeneity and intersectionality to challenge hegemonic structures.

After establishing this context, the following section will review Junghaus's argument for Roma contemporary art as activism to clarify how contemporary art may inform, reflect, or problematize identities forged through activist projects. Addressing this will form the foundation for positioning my own research findings within ongoing debates among theoreticians and practitioners, ultimately helping to answer my research questions by clarifying to what extent Roma contemporary art projects in Hungary have instrumentalized Roma identities as catalysts for minority activism, and whether this activism remains an elite project or translates to local contexts and local actions.

Due to the transnational character of the Romani movement, this section will address activism across Europe. Although many Roma activist projects aim for local actions, they are ultimately connected to broader, complex processes and projects (Fosztó, 2020). While the methodological challenges this poses will be addressed in my methodology chapter, focusing on initiatives in a transnational context here aims to clarify the wider context in which activist projects in Hungary operate.

1.4.1 The Romani Movement- toward a "working dissensus"[1]

Roma activist Nicolae Gheorghe, quoted at the top of this section, has written extensively on Roma mobilization and the opposing approaches to Roma nation building. He identifies two major paradigms: one which relies on ethnic nationalism to forge an empowered identity, and one which relies on a civic approach to accomplish the same.

In terms of identities, the ethnic nationalist approach advances an idea of a collective entity to guarantee Roma rights that include national minority rights and legal protection of *Romanipen*, or the system of codified Roma cultural patterns (Gheorghe, 2013, p. 81). This approach is founded on recognition of Roma as a European-wide identity who, lacking a homeland of their own, are supported by the EU and have access to EU funds to undergird activist projects. Put simply, an ethnic nationalist approach, by necessity, acknowledges Roma identities as

[1] Andrew Ryder uses this term, coined by Bourdieu (1991), to point out that Romani Studies as a discipline can be a "space where academics from diverging intellectual traditions can at least agree to participate in constructive dialogue" (Ryder, 2020, p. 102).

homogenous in order to achieve political objectives. Gheorghe critiques this paradigm for a handful of reasons, namely that an ethnic nationalist approach sets out to protect the community (and culture) rather than the individuals that constitute it; moreover, assuming an ethnic nationalist model requires a legal definition of who is or is not Roma, which inevitably stirs debates about the criteria for being Roma, who is a "genuine" Roma, and what constitutes authenticity (Gheorghe, 2013, p. 87). At the core of these disputes is the objective of monopolizing the political decision-making power "on behalf of those possessing acknowledged rights" (Gheorghe, 2013, p. 87), leading to further questions about collective rights at the international EU level and the ways individuals are treated as Roma in their respective societies or countries.

The ethnic nationalist approach to Roma activism has been shaped by several factors including the rapid growth of civil society and the expansion of international organizations into post-socialist Central and Eastern European countries. The aftermath of 1989's rapid social and economic changes left a vacuum in civil society, quickly filled by civil society organizations (CSOs) acting as channels for "challenging the 'authoritarian' remainders of postauthoritarian regimes and transforming them into liberal democratic, economically sustainable, and 'minority-friendly states'" (van Baar, 2020, p. 27). Roma rights became an avenue through which Western donors could assert influence by directly supporting or establishing Roma-related CSOs. This, occurring parallel to the growing strength of civil society in the post-1989 newly forged democracies in Central and Eastern Europe, formed the foundation of the formal Romani movement (van Baar, 2020). Yet it is also worth noting that the precursor to this movement may be traced back to the 1960s, when the first Roma NGOs were established (Acton, 1974). As mentioned above in the discussion of identities, the activism of these early NGOs culminated in 1971 with the First World Romani Congress, a turning point for conceiving of Roma issues (and therefore Roma identities) on an international scale.

The Romani movement of the 1960s and 1970s was slow compared to that of the 1990s and 2000s. In the decades after the collapse of state socialism, Romani activists defined their concerns in terms of a political movement, demanding recognition of cultural, political, and linguistic rights as a minority. Central to these demands was also the insistence on representation and participation in policy-making decisions at international, national, and local levels in order to

address pressing social and economic concerns (Gheorghe & Mirga, 2001). At the same time, these decades were marked by numerous developments in the establishment, funding, and support for European-wide Roma initiatives by Western donors or international bodies like the EU and Council of Europe. In 2003, the European Roma Information Office (ERIO) was established as an international Roma advocacy organization, funded by George Soros and the EU. In 2005, the European Roma Traveller Forum (ERTF) was established by the EU and Council of Europe with the intent of playing a consultative role for policy formation. Yet both of these early iterations of international activism have received criticism for failing to develop sustainable channels through which international projects could bolster and sustain local activism in Roma communities (Ryder et al., 2022).

Critiques of the ways Roma and pro-Roma civil society and political organizations instrumentalize a consolidated ethnic identity to achieve activist goals frequently reflect early critiques of the Roma affairs civil society sphere itself, echoing Trehan's (2009) conceptualization of the "'NGOization' of Roma rights" (p. 60). Rostas et al. (2015) problematize the idea of a specifically "Roma" civil society, arguing that, while it may serve as a site of resistance or emancipation, it may also uphold cultural hegemony and physical oppression in the Gramscian sense (p. 8). Subscribing to a definition of "Roma society" means acknowledging it as a closed space, separate from the rest of society, which ethnicizes social issues and may further marginalize or segregate individuals perceived to be Roma. Referring to this space as the "Roma Ghetto," they argue that the aim of inclusion that these activist projects often seek disconnects "Roma issues" from "broader social, economic, and political developments" which may result in paternalistic approaches to "integrate" the "undeveloped/marginalised/uncivilised 'Roma society'" into the "developed/just/democratic/civilised 'society'" (Rostas & Rővid, 2015, pp. 8-9), constructing a false binary. Instead, they argue, Roma should "build on brotherhood, solidarity, trust, and transparency" to transform the unjust society in which they live and, contrary to expectations, avoid seeking a common voice for Roma issues (ibid, p. 10). This echoes Costache's previous arguments that locate resistance and identity reconfiguration in the plurality of Roma voices rather than in a singular, homogenous narrative.

Surdu and Kovats (2015) challenge the politicization of Roma identity which has been adopted to assist in Roma inclusion policymaking for projects "designed to change the world" (p. 7). They argue that "Roma," as a "dynamic political identity constructed mainly from above and from outside by political and expert communities" has negative repercussions for those classified as "Roma," the very individuals these policies are ostensibly there to benefit (ibid). These include the risk of prescriptive and normative labels adopted via self-ascription of an externally imposed identity, which in turn may limit the potential for action among those ("Roma") categorized by "experts" (Surdu & Kovats, 2015, p. 8). They also caution that the institutionalized Roma label could "strengthen the rejection of Roma by others," with self-ascription of the label potentially entailing "the acceptance of expectations that limit aspirations and opportunities" (ibid). A distinctly Roma political identity also, they further argue, "obscures reflection on problems of inequality and governance in European societies that affect large numbers of people, be they Roma or not" (ibid, p. 7).

Alongside the proliferation of funding for Roma and pro-Roma CSOs by large, external donors, another issue has emerged related to oversaturation of the field and competition for resources. D'Agostino (2014) points out that increased bureaucracy related to accessing EU funds has favored more globally oriented, pro-Roma (as opposed to Roma-led) CSOs over grassroots level Roma CSOs. This has consequentially fostered an emergent elite class of pro-Roma CSOs in the international field and caused smaller or local Roma organizations to increasingly depend on donors whose agendas may differ from the interests of the constituencies they serve. This also means that there is a lack of Romani involvement in decision-making within international activist projects, like the EU Roma Platform. The stark consequences of these dynamics have put the current state of Romani affairs into a "gridlock" in which the impact of Romani activism has not proliferated to those living most at the margins, leaving the vast majority of Roma with little improvement of their day-to-day socioeconomic circumstances (Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2020, pp. 201-203). In this way, Roma working within civil society remain in the position of the subaltern, confined by hierarchical structures which favor top-down approaches to activism found in neoliberal paradigms and elide Roma decision-making power (Trehan, 2009).

1.4.2 A civic model of Roma activism

"On a larger level, the Romani movement does not exist. To the extent that the movement does exist on the European level, it is full of outside influences. To be honest, in reality to me it looks more as if non-Romani people are presently making the Romani movement, with the participation of some Roma. So the Romani movement, in my opinion has an artificial (unnatural) appearance .... I think we need to change this situation .... It is time to start to build the Romani movement from the bottom up, with our own initiatives and resources. We need a lot of small-scale initiatives and all of them together will give us a signal as to the direction or directions we have to go. Of course we need to work together. But one more time I have to say the initiatives must be led by Roma, because only that way are we going to have a real shape and see our power and weaknesses." Dusan Ristic, Romani artist and activist from Serbia, quoted in Trehan (2009, p. 63)

While the early iterations of the Romani movement attempted to construct a homogenous ethnopolitical Roma identity to legitimize the demands for recognition of Roma rights, forge a presence in politics and policymaking, and access support from large foundations and political bodies, recent activism instrumentalizes the heterogenous character of identity to undergird diverse social movements through less institutionalized channels. This has meant a wider emergence of discussions around self-representation, heterogenous versus homogenous identity labels, and Roma participation in policy decisions. These individual movements have contributed to a range of developments with lasting impacts on European society and Roma people living in Europe, including increased ownership of Roma histories and memories, Roma production of and mobilization around Roma archives, and the development of overlapping, sometimes conflicting intersectional Roma movements like the Romani women's movement and Romani LGBTQ+ movement (van Baar & Kóczé, 2020).

The seeds of this approach are foregrounded in the second paradigm of a Romani movement outlined by Gheorghe: the civic approach. In the civic approach to Roma mobilization, it is national governments rather than international organizations which bear the responsibility for maintaining Roma rights through citizenship. The main tactic of activists working to forge a civic Roma identity is to support a variety of civic associations embedded in both national governments and Roma organizations at the local rather than the European level, ensuring that Roma rights as individuals and as citizens of their societies are upheld (Gheorghe, 2013, p. 81).

Gheorghe is clear in his support for this model, arguing that a civic approach "offers a way of reducing the costs of traditional or ethnic nationalisms – such as competing claims for 'authenticity' and intraethnic struggles for hegemony exemplified in postcolonial history" (Gheorghe, 2013, p. 88). This approach rests on constructing civic and voluntary associations where "people with common interests can maintain specific cultural values consistent with the rule of law" (ibid).

What Gheorghe alludes to here is the need to address Roma issues not as exclusively *Roma* issues but rather as a suite of diverse, overlapping, and intersecting socioeconomic circumstances that affect Roma as citizens but just as well may affect other, non-Roma members of society. Forging a Roma identity as a *demos* has the capacity to move solutions out of the "Roma ghetto." A Roma civic identity, then, allows Roma activists to engage in political and activist projects alongside non-Roma activists in their political environment. This shift to non-ethnic identity politics has the potential to create "a force which must be contended with and reduces the risk of being marginalized by traditional anti-Roma prejudices" (Kovats, 2013, p. 126). Crucially, it also forges a solidarity paradigm in which Roma activists may diversify their political agendas and work with non-Roma activists in a "shared political struggle" where solidarity goes both ways in a reciprocal relationship of support (ibid).

Trehan (2009) agrees, arguing that the "'NGOization' of Roma rights within an international neoliberal context limits Roma actors' ability to achieve equality, "as they do not offer possibilities for re-structuring power in society, and moreover, replicate hierarchies within European society" (Trehan, 2009, p. 64). She locates the solution to this in a movement grounded in Romani diversity with an emphasis on "local level knowledge" and social and economic justice (ibid, p. 65).

Diversity is a key factor for those advocating a civic, local, or bottom-up model of activism. Several activist projects locate power in a shared struggle that crosses beyond ethnic delineations of identity and instead acknowledges the diverse backgrounds people may hold alongside their Roma identities. Crenshaw's framework for conceiving of an intersectional approach to oppressions and activism is again useful here to understand the diversification of activist tactics in recent years. In wielding Roma as a civic identity, a new generation of activists has found

solidarity with feminist, LGBTQ, and youth movements to amplify their efforts and diversify their tactics for enacting political change.

A notable development by way of the diversification of the Roma movement can be found in Roma youth mobilization efforts. The Roma youth movement has articulated the need to distinguish their aims and approaches to activism from those of their predecessors (Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2020) and mobilize around Roma identities from an affirmative perspective rather than one grounded in victimhood (Mirga, 2014). Grassroots Roma youth organization ternYpe International Roma Youth Network has advocated for dialogue between policy makers and young people and worked to mobilize Roma youth across Europe around issues of increased visibility. Youth activists also make use of new aesthetics or images from popular culture to forge new symbols of empowerment. Drawing from comic books and superhero stories, for example, Roma youth have mobilized around identity frameworks that depict their identities as a source of empowerment and differentiate their movement from older generations' activism which forged a movement based on stigma (Vermeersch, 2006; Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2020).

While not explicitly acknowledging a framework of intersectionality in his discussion of Roma as a political identity, McGarry nonetheless highlights the importance of emphasizing shared "hopes and aspirations (health, family, work, opportunity, happiness)" among both Roma and "majority" society (McGarry, 2014, p. 761). In constructing an identity grounded in solidarity *between* rather than only *within* groups, Roma activism that embraces the complexity of intersecting identities has the potential to amplify the voices and efforts of activists from diverse backgrounds seeking shared goals, including Roma activists working toward Romani emancipation, Roma activists engaged in LGBTQ+ struggles, and feminist activists seeking women's liberation.

In his essay engaging with András Bíro and Nicolae Gheorghe in a debate on Roma self-image and the path forward for Roma activism, Martin Kovats concludes by asking whether Roma identity politics can actually be a progressive force in today's economic and political climate. He suggests that it can, indeed, as long as the Roma identity politics "orientates its activity on finding common ground with non-Roma, and thus qualifies the political use of Roma identity" (Kovats, 2013, p. 128). I would like to use Kovats's question as a point of departure for investigating the ways that Roma contemporary art projects instrumentalize Roma identities to

advance activist goals. The following section will contextualize the current state of Roma contemporary art production to address this question. Grounded in Tímea Junghaus's theory for conceiving of Roma contemporary art as an activist project, it will conclude by asking if and how Roma contemporary art can challenge hegemonic representation, forge intersectional solidarity, and construct modes of activist resistance. Doing so will help to elucidate whether visual contemporary art production has the potential to move Romani activism out of the domain of an elite project by instrumentalizing new approaches to Roma identities.

1.5 Roma Contemporary Art

As with the previous two sections, this section must begin by clarifying what researchers, artists, curators, and museologists mean by "Roma contemporary art." In fact, the existence of a specifically Roma contemporary art is up for debate among those working in the fields of art history and cultural heritage, a debate I will return to in the discussion of my empirical findings. For the sake of defining the parameters of this section, I refer to Tímea Junghaus's conception of Roma contemporary art as art which is "organized around the question of visibility" and on rewriting mainstream discourse upon gaining a position of visibility. Roma Contemporary art is a reaction to and subversion of the historical discourse of a "Gypsy problem" which essentializes Roma experience around issues of unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion and blames them for societal shortcomings, placing Roma in a position of marginality (Junghaus, 2014, p. 26). Roma contemporary art is being produced by artists and intellectuals across Europe who are utilizing media and technology to create interactive and community projects with activism at their core to counteract the relative lack of material means for artistic expression available to Roma. These projects increase visibility for the multitude of Roma artistic, cultural, and creative expressions that exist within this heterogenous and non-static community and attempt to combat depictions of Roma culture as monolithic and homogenous.

Sholette (2022) points to the activist potential of contemporary art by emphasizing its role as merely one component of a broader artistic field that is socially engaged, collective in nature, and/or participatory in practice (p. 12). Activist art may repurpose imagery which can be familiar to viewers to challenge audiences' expectations by rewriting the narrative around an image. Activist art can, further, transform simple images, such as a mural depicting flowers, into an "act of transgression" within certain geopolitical circumstances (Sholette, 2022, p. 19). The

contemporary activist artist may be distinguished both from other activists and other artists by focusing on "agitation and protest as an artistic medium." Often, activist artists operate collectively with other artists and with political activists as they seek to evoke positive social change (ibid, p. 12). With these definitions in mind, this section will explore how contemporary art has been used by Romani activist artists to draw attention to their Roma identities through art that highlights, complicates, or challenges expected or familiar (or even, to a degree, stereotypical) images associated with Roma. Doing so will clarify the social potential of Roma contemporary art and determine whether contemporary art production informs consolidated/homogenous Romani identities, diverse/heterogenous identities, or a combination of the two.

Roma art has traditionally been thought of as "folk art," including handicrafts such as woven baskets or metal-worked objects, due to the historical emphasis on the value of utilitarian objects. Another important dimension to Roma art is the intangible cultural heritage of traditional songs, dances, stories, and poems. Many of these, such as the *Csárdas*, share a place within Hungarian national cultural heritage in addition to Romani heritage (Kostic Cisneros, n.d.). These tangible and intangible elements of art and culture were highly valued as part of a larger Hungarian cultural fabric and often provided livelihoods for Roma artisans, craftsmen, and musicians. However, as discussed briefly above, conceptualizing of Roma art solely in the domain of "folk art" or craftwork limits the capacities of Roma artists to produce works that do not conform to these traditional standards, curbing opportunities for integration into a wider art canon. Roma visual arts in the form of paintings were first referenced in Central Europe in 1968 by historian István Kerékgyártó and ethnographer Pál Bánszky, marking a departure from Roma art being confined to the realm of "folk" art and attributed to collectives rather than individual artists (Junghaus, 2014, p. 28). This paved the way for broadening definitions of "Roma art," although it would still be two decades before the "cultural turn" which allowed Roma art to be appreciated for aesthetic merit rather than as purely ethnographic phenomena (ibid, p. 30).

Consolidated efforts of Roma visual artists to gain recognition as a group began around the time of the first World Romani Congress in 1971. This was the first instance of a reference specifically to "Roma Art," but support for Roma art until the late 1970s was primarily provided by institutions that continued to relegate it to the peripheries of the contemporary art world. In

1979, the First National Exhibition of Self-Taught Roma Artists was organized by activist Ágnes Daróczi in Budapest, raising international awareness of Roma art and garnering international support for Roma cultural expression. The early 1990s saw a shift wherein culture became central to debates around democracy and civil society in Central and Eastern Europe. The focus on issues like gender, ethnicity, and class renewed scholarly interest in the exploration of Roma culture and history, and Roma intellectuals set out to explore and present Roma art and remove stereotypes in artistic depictions of Roma (Junghaus, 2014).

The decade following gave rise to a proliferation of Roma intellectual, cultural, and artistic events led by Roma scholars and artists as well as non-Roma intellectuals interested in examining Roma representation and civil society participation. Various individual projects culminated in 2007 with the First Roma Pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennale. The contemporary Roma art presented here broke with tradition to move artist and audience beyond what Tímea Junghaus refers to as a "conceptual ghetto" which essentializes Roma experience as a homogenous "Other" distinct from the majority white population (Junghaus, 2014, p. 32). The Roma Pavilion instead proposed a transnational, multicultural, and up-to-date Roma identity embodying European ideals like mobility, adaptability, and multiculturalism, presenting Roma as assets to contemporary European society.

Postcolonial theory is again useful for framing the ways contemporary art production by Roma people has the potential to disrupt hegemonic representation, draw attention to processes of "othering," and forge modes of resistance. Junghaus refers to Spivak's concepts of the subaltern and "othering" to discuss the ways in which the art presented in the First Roma Pavilion reflected a diversity of Roma culture, artists, and identity politics as the "first conscious subaltern revolt of the European Roma intelligentsia" (Junghaus, 2014, p. 33). Junghaus argues further that the Roma Pavilion showed that it is specifically in the "field of the visual where Roma subalternity – this burden of being the 'other', and the physical, symbolic, epistemic – violence, in other words, the colonizing act of European majorities toward the Roma, is the most visible and evident" (ibid).

Junghaus applies postcolonial theoretical concepts to Roma contemporary art to discuss Roma identities in ethnic terms, a framing which shares more in common with the European Roma identity wielded by elite ethnopolitical projects than the civic model advocated by Gheorghe. As

such, it remains unclear how Roma contemporary art relates to Roma identity politics forged at the local level. Indeed, projects which attempt to make sense of Roma identities and resistance through contemporary art appear to inhabit the international, European sphere.

For example, the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERIAC) utilizes an ethnic nationalist approach as it institutionalizes Roma contemporary art as a form of activism. Rather than tackling advocacy or policy specifically, ERIAC was developed to address the root cause of Roma discrimination and exclusion by promoting positive (self-)images of Roma through art, in an effort to forge and engage with "dynamic conceptions of Romani identity that challenge tradition and reification" (Ryder et al., 2022, p. 10). The efforts of ERIAC align more closely with the vision of political mobilization in terms of ethnicity and cultural identity originally laid out by Romani elites in the 1990s, and, due in part to this limitation, ERIAC's activities have been some of the most heavily criticized among the international activist projects of the past two decades.

In line with critics of the identity politics upon which the ethnic nationalist Romani movement rests (Kovats, 2003; Gheorghe, 2013), critics of ERIAC point out that framing exclusion's root causes in terms of ignorance or mistrust from "majority" society positions exclusion as a "matter of the mind," eliding the material consequences of systemic racism (Ivasiuc, 2020a, p. 4). Moreover, Roma activists themselves have criticized ERIAC's institutionalization of a "European Romani identity" which gives Roma elites a platform for producing cultural authenticity as a means of overcoming social, economic, and political marginalization (ibid). This is an important debate I will return to when discussing my empirical findings in a later chapter. For the sake of a brief analysis here, it is important to note that a third critique of ERIAC stems from the financial support invested in this initiative by the Open Societies Foundation and the Council of Europe at the same time as the ERTF's funding was discontinued (Ivasiuc, 2020a). This parallel development begs questions around the role of large, well-established, powerful funders in top-down initiatives like ERIAC, ERTF, and ERIO. Given that all of these projects, among several others, have successfully made use of a common Roma identity to form the basis of a political movement, it is important to ask to what extent the identity politics forged at the international scale translates to local advocacy and activist initiatives. Ivasiuc (2020a), referencing previous studies by Timmer (2010) and Schneeweis (2014), questions the ways in

which knowledge generated by such projects is shaped by "the ways in which funds are made available for the production of specific types of discourses grounded in particular visions of the Roma as a population in need of intervention" (p. 6). This question highlights the tensions that remain when considering identity's usefulness as a means of advancing Roma minority rights, and it further points to a need for addressing whether identities wielded within art are capable of catalyzing bottom-up activist responses or whether activism through art remains an elite project.

Although Junghaus (2014) contends that Roma visual art may now be linked to a political project that aims for "social liberation from all power organized as inequality, discrimination, exploitation, and domination," redefines the position of Roma in hegemonic narratives, and invites Roma to be both viewer and subject (p. 41), further analysis is needed to determine how far this repositioning is capable of going. Carmona (2019) looks to art history rather than contemporary art to supply a framework for understanding how Roma representation within art influences the views held about Roma people from "majority" society. She traces the historical development of Roma representation in art from medieval archetypal representation, as allegorical embodiments of "telluric power through a politicized representation of nature owing to the advent of nationalism" (Carmona, 2019, p. 154), and as romanticized yet marginalized and Orientalized objects. Her conclusion makes the case for a reassessment of the relationship between the singular and the plural, one which accounts for "multiple forms of Romaniness." The Romani being, she argues, "challenges the notion of identity, taking position outside the essentialism versus universalism dialectic" (Carmona, 2019, p. 159). In differentiating between the "typologies of rejection" represented in art depicting Roma, Carmona clarifies how justice in the form of the "power to say, to act, and to tell" may be enacted by majority societies, who have a moral imperative to engage with history in ways that critically examine their complicity in Romaphobia (ibid).

In contrast to this, contemporary art produced by Roma people has the capacity to flip these representations on their head by forging a Romani subjectivity that gives agency to Roma artists as producers and Roma audiences as viewers, both lacking in Carmona's review of visual art which rendered Roma solely as objects. Romani artist Daniel Baker reflects on this inversion of the hegemon by assessing the role of visibility in Roma art. He argues that "subverting and reformulating the symbols and preoccupations of Romani visual culture" allows for inquiry into

"the often discriminatory relationship between marginal artistic practices and those that form the elite centre ground" (Baker, 2017a, p. 742). Baker's analysis confronts the fraught relationship between heterogeneity and homogeneity as strategies for gaining visibility through representation of Roma within art. Using the example of nomadism, frequently depicted in Roma art by Roma artists, Baker refers to "essentialism" but argues that essentializing concepts can be employed as a strategy for wider Roma emancipation. Referring to Spivak's theory of strategic essentialism, Baker contends that Roma representations which instrumentalize stereotypes can strengthen the awareness of a unified identity for the sake of later realizing diverse goals.

> [T]he idea of essence is employed whilst at the same time its essentialist nature is critiqued – an ambitious approach which inevitably results in compromise as coming together under a common identity in order to achieve political progress often means that significant differences must be temporarily suspended. Part of the value of this approach, however, is that whilst operating as a strategy of group struggle it also opens up internal debate relating to diversity within the group – the latter continuing to generate lively discussion among Roma groups worldwide (Baker, 2017a, p. 743).

In highlighting a compromise between homogenous and heterogenous representation, Baker locates a path that allows for both ethno-nationalist *and* civic Roma activism. Roma art can be a tool and a framework for broadening the possibilities for these two approaches to work together. The struggle for Roma emancipation is not static. It does not have a fixed endpoint, and—just as identities are fluid and often changing—so too are the approaches and objectives of Romani activism. Perhaps the ethnic approach and recognition of a shared struggle is a beginning step in a larger, ongoing process of definition, negotiation, and reframing of Roma identities which can increasingly be shaped by diversity.

1.6 Conclusion

There is a vast body of literature dedicated to exploring Roma identities and representation in Hungary. A select few studies explore the pluralistic nature of Roma identities and link this to Romani activism. Gaps remain, however, in extending these concepts further to investigate alternative or more recent forms of activism, for example, through art as a mobilization effort.

This chapter has endeavored to apply postcolonial theory to provide a context and framework for linking Roma identities to activism and contemporary art production. In exploring two main theoretical approaches to conceiving of Roma identities, it showed that postcolonial theoretical concepts such as othering, hegemony, and intersectionality provide a useful framework for addressing Roma identities in the plural, with diversity at its center. It then applied a pluralistic understanding of Roma identities to evaluate two major approaches to Romani activism, an ethnic nationalist model and a civic model. It explored several critiques of the ethnic nationalist model and ultimately argued that Roma identities seeking to disrupt hegemonic representation, and which allow for diversity and intersectionality, can be found in the realm of civic activism. Finally, it sketched a brief outline of the current state of Roma contemporary art production and reviewed the limited scholarship dedicated to understanding Roma contemporary art as a means of achieving activist goals through representation. In doing so, it sought to clarify if and how Roma contemporary art production geared toward realizing activist objectives makes use of homogenous and/or heterogenous representations of Roma identities.

Further empirical analysis is needed to investigate to what extent Roma contemporary art projects succeed in forging Romani activisms which use diverse identities to move activism out of the realm of an elite construct and bolster inter-group solidarity. Moving forward, postcolonial concepts such as hegemony, othering, and intersectionality will be used to review Roma contemporary art projects and test the extent to which contemporary art forges identities which push back against othering and a “majority” hegemon to embrace intersectionality and diverse representations.

II. Methodology

2.1 Introduction

The central aim of my research has been to provide an understanding of the relationship between Roma identification, contemporary art, and activist projects in current-day Hungary. To do this, I have probed for answers to the following questions:

- How are Roma identities instrumentalized to advance activist initiatives?
- How does contemporary art production inform, reflect, or problematize these identities?
- Is "Roma contemporary art" a useful avenue for communicating and achieving activist objectives rooted in Romani identities?
- Is activism through contemporary art capable of facilitating bottom-up, diverse initiatives or does it remain confined to the realm of the elite?

Another important question emerged through the process of conducting this research:

- Is it even possible to discuss such a thing as "Roma contemporary art"?

To address these questions, an interpretive, qualitative methodological approach to gathering and analyzing data was taken. My decision to conduct interpretive and qualitative research was informed by this approach's capacity to yield insight into "events by discovering the meanings human beings attribute to their behaviour and the external world," with a focus on "understanding human nature, including the diversity of societies and cultures" (della Porta & Keating, 2008, p. 26). As my research seeks to interpret the meaning people attach to social events and circumstances within a specific cultural context, I selected a qualitative approach.

This approach was the most appropriate means of generating an understanding of the circumstances in which Romani identities are employed by and situated within art projects as activism. Della Porta and Keating (2008) argue that interpretive and qualitative social sciences methodologies can aid in understanding "the motivations that lie behind human behaviour, a matter that cannot be reduced to any predefined element but must be placed within a cultural perspective, where culture denotes a web of shared meanings and values" (p. 26). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) hold that qualitative research is a "situated activity that locates the observer in the

world," and that "qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p. 3). In line with this logic, this approach is suited to my research aims for its ability to contextualize two broad topics like activism and contemporary art within a specific social, cultural, and political milieu. My research does not seek to test an existing theory or hypothesis, as it does not aim to derive explanations from universal rules (della Porta & Keating, 2008, p. 27). Rather, this study is intended to interpret, explain, and analyze rich qualitative data in order to refine an understanding of the role of identity and contemporary art within activism.

The issue of researcher reflexivity and positionality has fundamental impacts on the ways social science researchers approach their work (Fremlova, 2018). Since interpretive, qualitative research acknowledges the inherent biases and values researchers bring to their work and accepts that interpretation of data will be subjective (Bryman, 2016, pp. 398-399), adopting a reflexive stance that examined my positionality was a key part of my methodology. Positionality "refers to a researcher's discursive situatedness in the social world in relation to power relations," and is "complemented by a gamut of variable, intersectional, and interlocking factors, such as the researcher's identities" (Fremlova, 2018, p. 101). Several Romani Studies researchers point out the heightened importance of positionality and reflexivity within research studies conducted on or with Roma by non-Roma researchers. Silverman calls for a "reflexive turn" in Romani Studies, arguing that "while self-examination of knowledge production is useful for all researchers, for non-Roma it is mandatory because historically non-Roma have held more authority" (Silverman, 2018, p. 77). Fremlova agrees, cautioning non-Romani researchers to be aware of their positionality since "doing research that highlights difference may contribute to the further marginalization and/or stigmatization of the research participants and their communities" (Fremlova, 2018, p. 104, referring to hooks, 1990).

As a non-Romani, American, ally-identified researcher, I approached my investigation of Roma in Hungary as an outsider on multiple levels. I had to constantly consider my outsider position and both the privileges and challenges this presented in order to keep my biases and values in view throughout the research process. I maintained a reflective journal as a key component of my methodology as a related but ultimately distinctive aspect of data-gathering. This, in turn, helped me to center what Vajda (2015) terms "critical whiteness" to reflect on and critically examine my

privilege and position as a non-Romani outsider researcher, and to challenge this privilege when possible. In practical terms, challenging this meant reflecting on four questions laid out by Fremlova when interacting with research participants:

- What role is played by my positionality as a non-Romani person researching issues of ethnicity/race in relation to Roma?
- Do I have white/non-Romani privilege and if so, how does it impact my research?
- How do I use my positionality to navigate different spaces? How is it operationalized?
- How does my positionality influence the interactions that I have with research participants? (Fremlova, 2018, p. 117).

Attempting to answer these questions informed my understanding of what a non-Romani identity means in terms of this research, and to interrogate the assumptions I held (or still hold) that were brought into this research. It also allowed me to reflect on and refine my research methods throughout my data-gathering process by incorporating my reflections after each interview into my approach for the subsequent interviews.

2.2 Methods

The majority of my research was carried out between September 2022 – March 2023. I conducted a textual analysis of various Roma contemporary art pieces, exhibitions, and galleries in Budapest or outside of Budapest but with Hungarian contributions. For the purposes of this study, I understand textual analysis as a methodology applied for "understanding language, symbols, and/or pictures present in texts to gain information regarding how people make sense of and communicate life and life experiences" (Hawkins, 2017). On this basis, exhibitions containing works of Roma contemporary art and websites dedicated to online display of Roma contemporary art were analyzed to answer questions such as, "How does this particular text connect with similar texts present at the time?" and "How does this text influence, reflect, or reject the views of society?" (ibid). Descriptions on placards accompanying paintings and exhibitions, blog posts, essays, and pamphlets and catalogues from museums and galleries were recorded and later included in NVivo alongside interview transcripts, where inductive coding was used to assess for common themes unique to these texts and analyze the areas of overlap between this data and interview transcript data. Textual analysis was deemed an appropriate methodology for its ability to examine messaging within visual art in the context of history,

culture, and politics and its usefulness in accompanying interview data to provide a richer understanding of meaning (ibid). Specific texts and images comprising this analysis included the following:

The **RomaMoMA Contemporary Art project** exists as a theoretical contemporary art museum and collaborative platform for reflecting on what a Roma Museum of Contemporary Art can/should/would be, should it exist. Initially, my research focused entirely on the images, writings (blog posts, textual descriptions, information about the website itself) on RomaMoMA's online "imagined and yet real…home to both the Roma arts and artists" (RomaMoMA, n.d.). Although my research expanded to include additional works, galleries, and exhibitions, my analysis still includes images featured in RomaMoMA's online museum, including Tamás Péli's 1983 painting *Születés (Nativity)*, András Jókúti's 2019 photo series, *Owning the Game,* and Norbert Oláh's 2021 installation *Anxiety of the Roma Artist,* as well as the ongoing blog posts by curators, museologists, and activists, and the explanatory texts of RomaMoMA itself. Through analyzing these three layers of content, I aim to uncover how Romani identities manifest through contemporary art and how an online space that explicitly aims to construct positive Roma images through visual art and written texts instrumentalizes these identities.

RomArchive, a digital archive of the Roma, is another online platform for housing, displaying, and offering reflection upon Roma arts and culture. Their aim is to make "arts and cultures of Roma visible, illustrating their contribution to European cultural history" and create "a reliable source of knowledge that is internationally accessible on the internet, thereby countering stereotypes and prejudices with facts" (RomArchive, n.d.). As with RomaMoMA, I included the texts explaining the history, context, and goals of RomArchive as well as some of the individual pieces of visual art displayed on the website in order to provide a multilayered perspective on the ever-changing cultural, social, and political context within which Roma contemporary art is being produced and analyzed. These individual pieces included Emília Rigová's painting series *Bári Raklóri*, 2012-2015, Daniel Baker's painting *Square Knot*, 2015, from his series *Makeshifting: Structures of Mobility,* and a 1988 film portrait of artist Tamás Péli, *Stációk*, by Hungarian director Vanda Zsoldos. A strength of RomArchive is the expansive nature of their collections, which include works produced across the European continent. I felt it was important to represent perspectives from Hungarian and non-Hungarian Roma artists to acknowledge the

international context in which national or local activism is situated. Analyzing the three pieces here (from Slovakia, the United Kingdom, and Hungary, respectively), therefore allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the similarities and differences in works which deal with Roma ethnic identity created by artists from various cultural and national backgrounds.

The **Szentandrássy István Roma Művészeti Galéria** (the **Szentandrássy István Roma Art Gallery**) was the first physical exhibition space I visited. Located in Budapest, the gallery displays temporary exhibitions by Roma artists and hosts regular workshops, concerts, and lectures to engage members of the public around Roma visual arts and artists. Of interest to my research was the Tamás Péli exhibition, which featured several paintings from his extensive and long career as an artist. I chose not to select a specific image or painting from this exhibition, as it felt arbitrary to discuss a handful of paintings simply because I was able to visit them in person. Instead, my analysis focuses on Péli's career as a whole (as both an artist and activist) and analyzes the role of a gallery space like the Szentandrássy István Roma Művészeti Galéria in upholding or critiquing the forms of Romani identities which Péli took an active role in shaping.

The second physical exhibition space I visited was the Ludwig Museum of Contemporary Art in Budapest. Here, I analyzed two individual paintings by artist **Omara** (**Mara Oláh**), *Mara első iskolás, 1952* (*Mara in the first grade, 1952*) and *Marának mégis lett új háza, 1967* (*Mara got a new house after all, 1967*). Omara's unique style of painting, which included autobiographical elements from her life and textual descriptions in her paintings themselves, allowed me to analyze both visual representation and an artist's words together. This inclusion yielded insight into how an artist of Roma origin perceived herself and her work in the context of her identities and within a broader Hungarian social fabric. I also explored the Ludwig's online archival database to include information from the **Sostar?** group's Emplotment exhibition at the Ludwig in my analysis. Sostar? explicitly set out to "change, reject, and rethink the schizophrenic conditions that, among other things, force also the group members to take on ethnicizing and moralizing roles" as Roma artists (Előhívás/Emplotment, n.d.). Thus, although the group has since disbanded, the inclusion of information about Sostar? provided interesting points of comparison and contrast for artists who embrace Roma identities in different ways to forge their work.

Finally, **Gallery8** in Budapest's 8th district, was a Roma Contemporary Art space financed by the European Roma Cultural Foundation (ERCF). All that remains of Gallery8 is a website dedicated to discussing previous exhibitions and a closed building with a u-lock on its front gate (see Figure 1). Although it is no longer operational, I make brief mention of Gallery8 in my empirical discussion to highlight the importance of shifting funding structures from overarching bodies like ERCF and their role in maintaining local spaces for housing, displaying, and supporting Roma artworks and artists. This feeds into understanding broader trends of the ways activist initiatives at the European level impact local manifestations of activism and identity construction.

Fig. 1 Gallery 8

Gallery8 Budapest | source: self

In line with della Porta and Keating's (2008) claim that qualitative and interpretive studies can benefit from interviews as a research method, further data to supplement the visual and textual analysis of art works was collected by conducting a series of semi-structured qualitative

interviews. Semi-structured interviews were deemed an appropriate method since they can aid in "acquiring a deep knowledge of the social community and the individual" (Bray, 2008, p. 298), which was important for answering my research questions. Interviews, as opposed to other methods of qualitative data gathering, such as participant observation or surveys, were selected because they also offer the chance to gather detailed information and provide an opportunity for dialogue with respondents in which follow-up questions can be asked to provide clarification (Sheppard, 2020).

Semi-structured interviews, rather than open-ended or structured interviews, provided a degree of flexibility but still allowed me to direct the conversation using questions pertinent to my own research (Bray, 2008, p. 309). A series of eight to ten questions with some sub-questions were provided to each interviewee before the interview. Using these as a foundation, I was able to ask specific follow-up questions based on the interviewee's responses. This suited my objectives well since open-ended but specific questions broadened the possibility for different themes to emerge from each unique interviewee.

Participants were briefed beforehand that the questions they were provided with were only a guide, and that I did not expect we would be able to cover every question in depth. Rather, this guide was used as a foundation for asking more detailed questions and posing follow-up questions based on the participant's response. Again, my positionality as a researcher formed an important component of the way questions were phrased and posed to the interviewees. This ensured that I was able to honestly reflect and communicate my background as a researcher to the participants and ask for clarification on concepts that may have been unfamiliar to me.

2.3 Participants

Interview participants were initially recruited from a pool of contributors to an online Roma contemporary art project, RomaMoMA, as their names and contact details were available on the project's website. Of the 14 contributors from RomaMoMA identified for interviews, four responded positively, and I was able to interview three of these four contributors. Two other respondents were identified through their involvement with the Ludwig Museum of Contemporary Art in Budapest. Four potential respondents were contacted from snowball sampling, one of whom agreed to participate in an interview. Overall, contributors possessed various higher education competencies in the fields of Romology, film, media, and cultural

theory, cultural heritage, urban studies, and museum studies. They work as local activists, curators, cultural researchers, historians, art historians, film producers, museologists, and lecturers.

Care was taken to ensure a diversity of areas of expertise were represented in my interview contributors. This resulted in a total of six interviews from experts in fields related to contemporary art in Hungary, Roma art and cultural heritage, curation and museum management, and Romani activism. Although my aim was to reach a point of theoretical saturation wherein no new themes were emerging in the data, this concept is murky, and I felt relevant information had been provided after the sixth interview (Guest et al., 2006).

Expert interviews were conducted both for their feasibility and the benefits conferred when consulting experts. Bogner et al. (2009) write extensively on expert interviews as a specific method of gathering data, commenting that "conducting expert interviews can serve to shorten time-consuming data gathering processes, particularly if the experts are seen as 'crystallization points' for practical insider knowledge and are interviewed as surrogates for a wider circle of players. Expert interviews also lend themselves to those kinds of situations in which it might prove difficult or impossible to gain access to a particular social field" (p. 2). Expert interviews thus suited my objectives as well as the limitations on my time, resources, and language abilities. Although in some senses my data is limited by interviewing only experts and, moreover, only a handful, they remain a suitable means of generating data to help answer my research questions since expert interviews "follow the goal that lies at the heart of qualitative research: the reconstruction of latent content of meaning" (Bogner et al., 2009, p. 6).

Interviews centered around themes of Roma activism in Hungary, the duality of representations, and activist agendas, and questions were adapted to suit the interviewee's expertise related to art, activism, or both. Interviewees were never asked to disclose personal details about themselves, including their ethnic identity. Interviews were conducted in English, and all interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed using a combination of secure transcription software and manual transcription based on my relistening to the recording and my notes.

2.4 Analysis

After all of the interviews were transcribed and textual data from museums and galleries was recorded, the texts were analyzed on the basis of grounded theory, using an inductive approach to coding. This allowed me to remain "open to new ideas, interpretations and ultimately theories" to emerge from the data (Becker et al., 2012, p. 338). As I did not set out to test a hypothesis, a grounded theory approach to analysis was appropriate for its ability to derive meaningful categories from the data itself (ibid) and thus gain "greater conceptual clarity" (Timonen et al., 2018, p. 4) through open coding. I used NVivo software to code and analyze the data, which enabled me to annotate my transcript data, link analytic codes, and systematically analyze data for emergent themes. Since inductive coding "allow[s] research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data" (Thomas, 2006, p. 238), codes were developed based on words, phrases, or ideas that were frequently mentioned in interviews. Raw data was first grouped into thematic categories, including: empowerment, activism, decolonization, art's political potential, representation, identification, canonization, duality, universality, essentialism, stereotypes, classification, transformation, self-representation, artist/activist perspective, stigma, art education, exclusion, and accessibility. Themes were then grouped into two main code groups: identity in art and art as activism, which provided a means of linking my research objectives to my data findings. A coding table is available in the appendix.

2.5 Limitations

As briefly mentioned above, there are several limitations to the data collected for this research. The relatively small sample size of interviewees means that results may not be indicative of broader trends, and further studies are necessary for more fully fleshing out the concepts derived from the data. However, the qualitative data generated from the six interviews are still valid since "it is their significance and the richness of the data that make the analysis agile and theoretically powerful" rather than the quantity of interviews conducted (Tarozzi 2020, p. 95). Moreover, cross-referencing themes to emerge in interviews with themes published on websites dedicated to presenting, exploring, and critiquing Roma contemporary art increased the validity of interview data since published essays, articles, and analyses by experts in the field allowed a way to check for similarities and differences between my interview data and the dominant discourse.

Relying on interviews to gather data presents a few limitations worth acknowledging. There is a risk of interviewee bias influencing participants' responses to questions (Bray, 2008), meaning that my interpretation of participant responses must have borne this in mind as an inherent aspect of the data gathered through interviews. Further, Bray (2008) goes on to acknowledge the importance of trust between the researcher and participants in ethnographic methods like interviews. The relatively short length of my study, and the fact that interviews were my only method of interacting with participants (as opposed to a combination of interviews and participant observation, which would have allowed researcher-participant relationships more time to develop) meant that trust was only established and maintained during the short one-two hours in which the interview took place. Without time to develop and manage my relationship as researcher with those I interviewed, I cannot expect that trust was fully established and that all interviewees would be forthcoming with all of their responses to my questions. Finally, interviews always carry the risk of misinterpretation of questions and answers between the researcher and interviewee (Bray, 2008). While I attempted to control for this as much as was within my power, for example, by offering to rephrase questions, asking if clarification was needed, and avoiding the use of overcomplicated language, it is important to account for potential miscommunication and misinterpretation as these are inherent risks in any instance of human communication.

Although Bogner et al. point out several benefits of expert interviews above, it is also important to note that relying exclusively on experts may also be limiting. Sirdu and Kovats (2015) suggest that Roma identity is an expert construction presented as legitimate but is in actuality "an identity in whose construction they [experts] are themselves playing an active part" by discussing, theorizing, and drafting policy for Roma issues (p. 6). For the purposes of my research, this means that the positionality of the experts I interviewed must be highlighted to contextualize the data derived based upon their understanding and interpretation of Roma identity issues. Although the experts interviewed meet the criteria set out by Gläser and Laudel (2009), in that they possess either "superior knowledge" derived from "designated processes of learning and training" (p. 118) or "special knowledge of a social phenomenon" (p. 117) based on practice or lived experience, the category of "expert" remains up for debate. Gheorghe disagrees entirely with the qualification of "experts" to speak on Roma-related topics, cautioning that "'Roma expert' is one of the titles to use if there is nothing else to say about a person"

(Gheorghe, 2013, p. 51). While Gheorghe's reference is related to his own experience with this label at a conference, and none of the people I interviewed self-identified as a "Roma expert," Gheorghe's critique is worth noting to call attention to the contested role of expert knowledge in relation to Romani experience. Despite these limitations, I still deemed expert interviews a suitable method of generating data since the interviews, regardless of respondents' classification as experts, provided "quality" data due to their understanding of the information needed, ability to provide extensive and detailed responses, reflect on their own roles, and share information about their own motives and perceptions (Gläser and Laudel, 2009, p. 117).

Messing (2014) raises the issue of defining "Roma" as a limitation for those conducting research on or drafting policy related to Roma, which she discusses among several methodological issues of surveying Roma populations in Europe. Reviewing various census data, she determines that "there are no objective criteria to determine who is Roma, not even within one country," since "Roma identity in most cases is multiple, fluid and situational" (Messing, 2014, p. 824). This means that, although participants recruited for interviews were not targeted on the basis of an assumed Roma identity, the conflicting conceptions of "Roma" present a theoretical limitation to this research. However, this conflict, in forming the core of my research, was acknowledged by every interviewee and thus provoked a deeper discussion of issues of identity, representation, and authenticity, key in answering my research questions.

Finally, as mentioned in the literature review, the scope of conducting research on Romani activism in Hungary is itself a minor methodological limitation, given the transnational character of the wider Romani movement (Fosztó, 2020). To overcome this, the discussion of my empirical findings will be situated within the larger context of understanding a transnational Romani movement. When analyzing visual and textual data from exhibitions and websites dedicated to Roma art, I include some pieces from non-Hungarian sources to ensure the transnational character of Roma art and Roma activism is represented. Although my research questions mainly focus on the Hungarian context, this limitation also serves as a strength by allowing me to focus narrowly on one place, developing concepts which may later be applied to subsequent studies examining other locales.

2.6 Ethical considerations

Steps were taken to ensure the confidentiality of all participants in this study, as outlined in University of Glasgow's postgraduate taught research ethics approval protocol. Research was approved by the College of Social Sciences Ethics Committee, and relevant steps were followed to ensure protection of the data and maintenance of participants' privacy. Appropriate response channels were developed ahead of time to ensure that participants received support during or after an interview, should they need any type of emotional or mental attention. This research was determined to be high risk since it dealt with questions related to marginalized ethnic identities; however, conducting expert interviews reduced this risk since, as experts, participants were already researching and discussing these sensitive issues in their professional lives. Explicit permission was asked to include the names of participants in my empirical discussion, and those who did not consent to being named were given a pseudonym. It was important that I offered participants the option to be named in the written thesis. Centering the voices of activists and artists, especially those who may come from a marginalized position in society, is essential for beginning to address the elision of Roma voices that researchers point out in the "Nothing about us without us" (Ryder et al., 2015) issue of the *Roma Rights Journal*. Allowing participants to opt-in to being named provided an opportunity for "discursive visibility" (Silverman, 2018, p. 80) for those with lived experience of Roma and/or activist identities.

III. Empirical Findings and Discussion

3.1 Introduction

As discussed in the previous chapter, to answer my research questions I consulted various experts in fields related to art, activism, and identity, and I reviewed several pieces of visual art that may be considered "Roma contemporary art" and analyzed their accompanying texts or descriptive texts on the websites displaying this art. Doing so has yielded rich qualitative data which clarifies and situates three major processes of Roma identity construction in art: recognition, reclamation, and resistance. This chapter will be structured around these three processes to discuss how each of these art pieces or initiatives uses contemporary art to communicate complex processes of identity construction, paying close attention to the ways elements in each piece highlight or complicate the dualistic nature of identity representation discussed in the literature review chapter. Each thematic section is broken down into several sub-sections related to the major issues that Romani activist projects are seeking to combat. In this way, individual art pieces can be analyzed in direct response to challenges defined by activists, and areas of overlap, concurrence, and contrast can be situated in conversation with one another.

3.2 Recognition and the burden of authenticity

"Being open about your Roma identity brought you death and immortality." Ferenc Lao Ce Kunhegyesi, from "A letter to Tamás Péli," 6 November 2022.

Tamás Péli's career as an artist cannot be discussed as distinct from his career as an activist. His role in establishing and shaping a modern Roma identity was informed by his artistic, intellectual, and political pursuits as a member of the Roma Cultural Association and the Hungarian National Assembly throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. Eszter Lázár's 2017 entry in RomArchive about a 1988 video portrait of Péli entitled *Stációk* (*Stations*) (Figure 2) refers to his reflexivity as an "artistic manifesto on the complex question of self-identity (or identities), whether Romani, Hungarian or European" and reflects on how an artist's ethnic background should be contextualized within the institution of art (Lázár, 2017). In the film, Péli speaks as a subaltern subject, allowing for not only representation of a Roma artist but a recognition of the

role of the Roma artist in challenging this representation within the larger historical art canon. According to Péli, “in order to become a Roma painter, the existence of the Roma bricklayer should be acknowledged. This is a massive and difficult question … and I would like to be a Hungarian painter” (Tamás Péli, 1988, quoted by Lázár, 2017). Péli thus advocates for recognition as an *artist* rather than a Roma artist, gesturing to recognition and inclusion in the Hungarian art canon on the grounds of merit rather than identity. Andrea Pócsik, an expert in Romology, film, media, and cultural theory who I interviewed agrees with Péli’s sentiment. When asked whether Roma art can be thought of in any singular or unifying way, Pócsik responded that discussing Roma art as a category is problematic. “We all know that it's a problematic approach when we say ‘Roma art’ itself,” she continued, “but we always have this problem or contradiction in our mind, and I think whenever we use the term [Roma] in that certain context, we can clarify, or we can somehow point out these contradictions.” While it may be useful to discuss features of an ethnic group anthropologically or sociologically to explore issues related to representation, Pócsik concluded that “artists themselves always try to be part of the more universal, the broader understanding of the artistic or cultural scenes. So, when someone is called the Roma artist, then we always have to think about that, that they not just belong to that ethnic group, but they belong to the much broader group of artists in Europe, all over the world.”

Fig. 2 *Stációk*

Vanda Zsoldos | 1988 | still from non-fiction film | source: https://www.romarchive.eu/en/collection/staciok-portrefilm-peli-tamas-festomuveszrol/

Fig. 3 *Születés*

Tamás Péli |1983 | oil on fiberboard panel painting in four pieces, total: 460cm x 910cm | installed at the Budapest Historical Museum (BTM) for OFF-Biennale 2021 | photo: ERIAC source: https://eriac.org/collectively-carried-out-tamas-pelis-birth/

Péli's monumental 1983 painting *Születés* (*Nativity*) (Figure 3), depicting the origin myth of the Roma people, is a testament to this position. Although at first glance the 4.6m x 9.1m four-piece panel painting may appear to advocate for recognition on the basis of Roma ethnicity by taking as its primary subject the Roma people's ethnogenesis, upon deeper inspection it reveals an intertwined history of the Roma people with that of Hungary. Features such as the participation of Roma people in the 1848 Hungarian Revolution and the Roma genocide during the Holocaust place Roma history as central to and inextricably linked with Hungarian history. Péli advocates, then, not only for recognition as an artist within the Hungarian modern art canon but for recognition of Roma history within the Hungarian historical canon. With this, Péli's political acts as both an artist and a figure within Hungary's Romani movement align with an approach to activism which recognizes Roma issues and identities as part of a wider European movement. By depicting Roma subjects and seeking recognition of Roma artists in the Hungarian or European art canon, Péli simultaneously advocates for recognition of Roma as a cohesive group and for the inclusion of Roma cultural motifs, political actors, and institutions within Hungarian and European frameworks.

Yet this begs questions around the role of such institutions as the Szentandrássy István Roma Művészeti Galéria in forging or maintaining Roma identities. As an art gallery in Budapest specifically for Roma art, the presence of the Szentandrássy István gallery would appear to advocate for a separate Roma art canon, distinct from a wider European contemporary art canon or Hungarian art canon. The gallery's inclusion of a Tamás Péli exhibition somewhat complicates Péli's quest to be recognized as simply a painter or a Hungarian painter rather than a Roma painter. The contradictory nature of representation of Roma art and, moreover, the ownership of Roma identity as an artist alluded to in the quote at the top of this section, was discussed in detail with many of my interviewees. When asked whether Roma art appeals to specifically Roma issues or more universal human issues, several of my respondents acknowledged that Roma aesthetics and visual motifs can be employed by Roma artists seeking to draw attention to universal human concerns. Film and cultural expert Pócsik, mentioned above, pointed to the ways Romani history and Romani identity are employed by artists seeking to emphasize a shared, universal struggle by concretizing (through visual representation) what may exist as an abstract idea in someone's mind. Cultural heritage expert and historian Eszter György elaborated that institutions like the Szentandrássy István gallery, although a distinct Roma space, fill an important role for recognition through art because the struggle for any sort of recognition remains an issue. In her opinion, art can be an entry point for people to think through issues raised by Roma activists and artists because "art or fine art or painting doesn't need translation in a way like a theater play would need it or a movie would need it." However, she cautioned that when thinking about accessibility and art as an entry point, we must also consider that "the long-term status of Roma art in Hungary… is stuck in this label of 'naïve art,' which is in a way the heritage of the state socialist system." Due to socialism's "forced assimilatory practices and policies" the label "Roma art" would not have been used. Socialist governments, György continued, "didn't neglect the very existence of Roma people, so they put them into this label 'naive art.'" This history, combined with continued social oppression, has made it difficult for contemporary Roma artists to gain recognition in a wider Hungarian or European art canon.

The presence of separate exhibition spaces also raises questions around authenticity, and who/what is capable of bestowing the designation of "Roma art" or "Roma artist" onto a particular piece. In functioning as a specifically Roma art gallery, the Szentandrássy István gallery is in a position to authorize a particular discourse which designates artists like Péli as

"Roma artists," even if Péli himself wished to be recognized as a Hungarian artist. This form of representation is similar to that found in the ethnic nationalist model of Roma activism which Nicolae Gheorghe critiqued for its reliance on an idea of a "genuine" or "authentic" Roma, discussed in the literature review. This inevitably replicates hierarchical power structures which facilitate top-down determinations of Roma identity, potentially relegating some Roma artists to the margins even as they seek to increase accessibility and inclusion.

Attending to this idea of authenticity may help to answer one of my research questions, which asks whether activism through contemporary art is capable of facilitating bottom-up, diverse initiatives or whether it remains an elite construction. The presence of separate exhibition spaces like the Szentandrássy István gallery or the former Gallery8 in Budapest provide a means for artists of Roma background to continue to challenge hegemonic representation, even if many must still do so within the confines of separate exhibition spaces which confer their own definitions of "Roma contemporary art" onto artists. Norbert Oláh's 2021 installation *Anxiety of the Roma Artist* (Figure 4) deals with recognition as a Roma artist to confront this issue. A brick wall erected outside of the former Roma Parliament building in Budapest's 8th district for the 2021 OFF-Biennale Budapest, Oláh's installation was accompanied by a text exploring his anxieties around representation and recognition as an artist of Roma origin. "It is not possible to speak of Roma art, in my view," he begins. Oláh goes on to acknowledge the significance of "Roma art" and "Roma artist" as terms but questions their meaning:

> Does the above mean that the Roma artist is someone of Roma origin practicing fine arts? Or would it be more precise to say that the Roma artist is an individual who simultaneously has an artistic and a Roma identity? Or is the Roma artist an artist of Roma origin, who moreover focuses on Roma-related themes? Or is the Roma artist one who, alongside their heritage and subject matter, can be recognised by using a rather loosely defined formal framework, like colour palette and certain motifs, along with a romanticism, mysticism and passion? Can Roma artists be identified based on certain ethnographic characteristics to be found in their works? (Oláh, n.d.)

Oláh attempts to address these questions by outlining the anxiety inherent in avoiding being pigeonholed as a "Roma artist" based on arbitrary criteria. Yet the contradictions of this avoidance manifest dually as outright rejection of a Roma identity (for the sake of recognition

based on artistic merit alone) and the acknowledgement of a Roma identity which may allow opportunities to raise meaningful questions and contribute to critical discussions, but which places artists in the role of political figures. This "dilemma," as Oláh phrases it, "hurts the artist's ego, since they feel that their Roma origin is a more important factor than their works and accomplishments," (Oláh, n.d.)

Fig. 4 *Anxiety of the Roma Artist*

Norbert Oláh | 2021 | installation in public space | photo: Zoltán Dragon / OFF-Biennale Archives | source: https://eriac.org/norbert-olah-the-anxieties-of-the-roma-artist/

Oláh's frustrations raise meaningful questions about the role of contemporary art in general, feeding back into my own questions about whether contemporary art can be used as an effective form of activism and whether Roma representation through art has a role in achieving activist

objectives like equality and justice. Joci Márton, an activist I interviewed, sees both positions of Oláh's dilemma as legitimate. "Roma art is both," he argued. Something can be called "Roma art" because the artist has "a Roma heritage, a Roma identity," but "Roma art" can also be used to address "universal issues" which are "cardinal for the Roma people," like housing access. Márton, however, takes his position further to argue from a position of collectivism as an activist. Understandably, Roma artists "don't want to be put in a box," he stated, "but I'm sad because they are not addressing the reason. Because if they would address the reason, maybe the people would understand that." To further articulate his position, Márton provided examples of artists and writers of other nationalities and ethnicities and their approach to embracing their origin in their works. "When you are talking about, I don't know, a Russian novelist, I don't think that somebody would often be offended. 'No, I'm just a novelist. I'm just a writer. I'm not a Russian,' you see? … So there is a stigma behind it [being Roma] and it's a negative stigma." Acknowledging that artists may not agree with his position, Márton emphasized his belief that artists have the tools, skills, and platforms to critically discuss meaningful issues. The artist's "problem is legitimate, and I don't want to judge it because really they have a legitimate reason to not be put in a box. But my problem is that they are not going further with the explanation."

What, then, does going further look like? To answer this question, the following section discusses three artists whose works act as a form of reclamation of a Roma identity. Each does so in a different way, providing multiple insights into how artists use identity as a subject in contemporary art to engage with, rethink, and reclaim Roma identities as a political act.

3.3 Identity reclamation

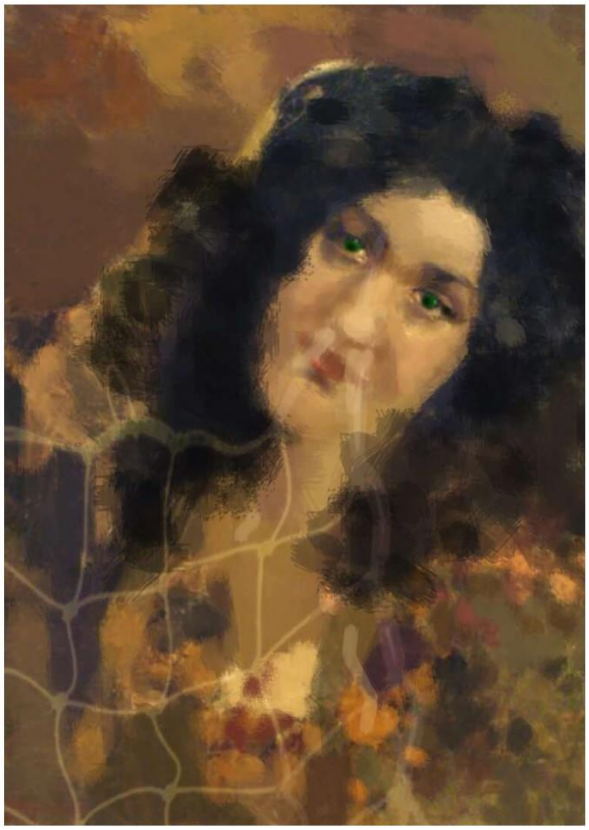
The landing page of the RomArchive website greets viewers with a set of images and phrases that slide in and out of view. One half of the page displays a photo from the online archive while the other half displays a brightly colored block with phrases such as "Reclaiming culture," "Deconstructing identity," "Resisting through art," and "Reconstructing history." RomArchive, then, makes clear from the outset its goals as it invites viewers to participate in this process. The discursive acts of reclaiming, deconstructing, resisting, and reconstructing are carried out through "narratives told by Roma themselves" in the various films, photographs, paintings, prints, texts, and audio materials that comprise the archive. In "presenting a kaleidoscope of various cultures and situating them as an integral part of the European cultural fabric,"

RomArchive confronts stereotypes, “perennial ascriptions imposed by others,” and the fact that “the many different Roma cultures remain largely ignored by European cultural institutions,” (RomArchive, n.d.). Below, I will explore three different artists—two of whom are represented in the contemporary art section of RomArchive, while one other is represented on RomaMoMA’s website—to determine how some artists’ overt political stances instrumentalize art to reclaim Roma identities, challenge essentialism, and inform activist agendas rooted in diversity.

3.3.1 Reclaiming diversity

Emília Rigová’s 2012-2015 painting series *Bári Raklóri* (Figure 5) is a subtle act of reclamation and exploration of a complex Romani self-identity. The project, a series of self-portraits of her alter ego named Bári Raklóri, deals with duality, self-representation, and cultural symbiosis to communicate the “mutual influence between the Roma and non-Roma.” According to Rigová, “Bári,” which literally translates to “big” was the nickname she was given in her family. “Raklóri” translates to “non-Romani girl,” and put together with “Bári” indicates the non-Romani daughter of non-Romani parents (Rigová, 2017). However, in reflecting on this name and alter ego, Rigová points out its use in symbolizing symbiosis rather than mistrust or hostility. In the paintings, Bári Raklóri is depicted against colorful backgrounds, seated and greeting the viewer with an inviting smile and direct eye contact. Elements that could identify the figure with any particular culture, ethnicity, nationality, or religion are missing in favor of a more abstract blending of the figure and the painting’s background. By emphasizing universality and symbiosis between Roma and non-Roma people in her paintings, Rigová reclaims her Roma identity as the product of mutual influence between both the Roma and non-Roma worlds. Her paintings stand as a testament to the impossibility of operating as a distinct culture cut off or removed from all others and thus locate identity in mutual acknowledgement, recognition, and respect between cultures.

Fig. 5 *Bári Raklóri*



Emília Rigová | 2012-2015 | painting | source: https://www.romarchive.eu/en/collection/bari-raklori/

Rigová's reclamation of a Romani identity equally influenced by Roma and non-Roma highlights the importance of mutual solidarity. Rigová's rather unique stance encompasses a universalistic interpretation of identities inclusive of members of the non-Roma "majority." This position highlights the fluidity of Roma and non-Roma identities and the shared responsibility in advocating for a more just society that this entails. In this way, Rigová's artistic stance echoes Nicolae Gheorghe's political stance in promoting a civic understanding of rights based on common understanding of values and shared interests. When viewed as an act of activism, Rigová's portrait series advocates for understanding Roma issues as a part of social processes that go far beyond exclusively Roma to affect all members of society and eschew any need to define who or what is authentically Roma based on rigid characteristics.

3.3.2 Challenging negative stereotypes

Daniel Baker's painting *Square Knot*, 2015 (Figure 6), from his series *Makeshifting: Structures of Mobility,* makes use of the Roma stereotype of nomadism to challenge a perception of Roma that reduces diverse experiences to a few commonly held beliefs. By emphasizing mobility, Baker reclaims a stereotypical trope and uses it to challenge the negative attitudes typically ascribed to it. In his commentary on the series, Baker states that "*Makeshifting* aimed to reposition the inherent elements of mobility as qualities to value rather than outlaw" by exploring mobility "in relation to physical, social, economic, cultural, political and aesthetic terrains with particular emphasis on relationships between the marginal and the mainstream in society" (Baker, 2017b). My interviewee Andrea Pócsik discussed approaches like Baker's in terms of essentialism. A "crucial term" to understand when thinking of Roma art, essentialism refers to the features of Romani culture seen as "unchangeable" or "traditional." Pócsik mentioned as examples elements "connected to freedom and wandering." She also mentioned that the importance of showing essentialist elements lies in contextualizing the "traditional" features within a representation of the present, changing situation. In this way, stereotypes can be used constructively within art to draw attention to and then subvert an audience member's expectation of what a Roma artist or Roma subject should look like, or what story a particular painting should tell.

Fig. 6 *Square Knot*

Daniel Baker | 2015 | painting | source: https://www.romarchive.eu/en/collection/square-knot/

Baker's series, then, engages with the question of what it means to be a Roma artist, similar to Oláh, albeit from a different perspective. While Oláh is more concerned with questioning the ways the artistic establishment itself imposes its own understandings of Romani identities onto artists to confer meaning, Baker's work challenges definitions imposed by outside, "majority" society as a whole. By wielding stereotypes, Baker is able to access audiences who may be drawn into his work based on their knowledge of and curiosity about his Roma background before then drawing their attention to the ways they are complicit in forging and maintaining representations of Roma as an "other." In this way, both Oláh's and Baker's works can be read as acts of decolonization, the former of the artistic establishment and the latter of their audiences.

3.3.3 Forging intersectional alliances

Not all artists and activists are in agreement about the usefulness of stereotypes to engage with "majority" audiences. While one interviewee, referred to here as Anna, discussed incorporation of stereotypes in contemporary art as "very powerful" for their ability to "turn down the stereotype's negative effect, both for the community and for those who are using those

stereotypes" in their art pieces, photographer András Jókúti and activist Joci Márton confront and rapidly dismiss stereotypes in their work. Their collaborative 2019 photo series, *Owning the Game* (Figure 7), provides an opportunity for reclamation of identities along the intersections of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, free of preconceived notions about what Roma LGBTQ+ people should look like. Their portrayal of five members of the LGTBQ+ community of Roma backgrounds centers around self-representation and allows their subjects to reclaim the narratives told about Roma LGBTQ+ people for themselves. The photos feature subjects directly looking into the camera to hold the viewer's gaze and incorporate objects like a baseball bat, representing strength and resistance. When reflecting on the project's importance on RomaMoMA's website, Márton emphasized the difficulties in rendering "how much harm one-dimensional stereotypes can cause to a minority or marginalised group, whose representation is really multifaceted and moves along a wide spectrum." To challenge this, "'owning the game' means that we have control of our own representation, in our own hands…. In order for a community to truly 'own the game', we need to develop narratives that serve our own interests by utilising our own strengths" (Márton, n.d.). By reclaiming Roma subjectivity and LGBTQ+ subjectivity from a position of strength and empowerment, Márton's and Jókúti's photo series subverts and overrides representations of these communities which stereotype their position as victims to be either pitied or saved by viewers. This reclamation of identities and representation in a public forum forces audience members to confront power relations and rethink our notions of what Roma and LGBTQ+ individuals can or should look like.

Fig. 7 *Owning the Game*

András Jókúti | 2019 | digital photo | source: https://eriac.org/owning-the-game-intersectional-self-representation-in-the-roma-lgbtq-communities/

In this way, Márton's approach to stereotypes' usefulness in artistic representation of Roma individuals conflicts with the way Daniel Baker instrumentalizes stereotypes to subvert expectations. "It is essential that we do not engage with the stereotypes the majority associates with us, and that we don't feel compelled to prove the opposite to them," Márton argues. He calls this form of engagement "reactionary communication," which he claims places not Roma individuals as the subject matter but rather the "prejudices standing in opposition to us – which have a significant platform, while we ourselves do not" (Márton, n.d.). By centering people at the intersection of two marginalized groups—those of Roma descent and members of the LGBTQ+ community—*Owning the Game* takes a firm stance on the role of representation and reclamation in activism. "I'm not afraid to say that I want to achieve something with this," said Márton, reflecting on the importance of his photo project. As a call for mutual recognition and solidarity among two marginalized groups, the photo project seeks an intersectional approach to activism which locates empowerment in diversity, inclusion, and equality between groups. Intersectionality provides a framework for oppressed groups and individuals to work toward acts of decolonization of their work by emphasizing the importance of mutual recognition and reclamation of their self-identities rather than relying on the "majority" or outside gaze to ascribe meaning to their work.

3.4 Resistance as process and praxis

Resistance forged through mutual cooperation, like that advocated in *Owning the Game* and *Bári Raklóri*, is a theme upheld on the website of RomaMoMA. RomaMoMA's stance on its role as a theoretical Roma contemporary art museum is that "the question of the museum is not the private business of the Roma community, because it concerns the redistribution of resources and the transformation of power relations within the society" (RomaMoMA, n.d.). RomaMoMA thus advocates simultaneously for a specifically Roma art canon, by discursively creating a Roma Museum of Contemporary Art, and for shared responsibility among both Roma and non-Roma members of society for overcoming hegemonic power structures that confine resistance to the realm of the marginal. By inviting audiences to join contributors, artists, and activists in reflecting on what a Roma museum of contemporary art could look like, how it should function, and who should be involved, RomaMoMA forges an opportunity for engaging with engrained power structures which locate social problems within fixed identity categories and prevent

opportunities for collaboration. The very act of creating RomaMoMA itself, then, is an act of resistance, as RomaMoMA opens the possibilities for discussing Roma art and Roma art history both "in relation to the authoritative Western canon of art historiography or in an alternative framework" (Ludlová, n.d.).

3.4.1 Resistance as postcolonial struggle

Several contributions to RomaMoMA's blog highlight resistance as a fundamental tenet of Roma contemporary art. In a reflection on the *RESIST!* exhibition showcasing art which illuminates anti-colonial resistance in the Global South, Roma and Sinti artists in Europe are discussed alongside artists whose work explores postcolonialism in places like Nigeria and Namibia. Showcasing contemporary art from Sinti and Roma artists in this context is conceived as an act of "(re-)exploration of [their] forgotten and unwritten history" and an opportunity to proclaim Sinti and Roma "power to resist oppression, take part in different forms of resistance, and thus … inhabit a different role than that of the victim" by liberating Roma subjectivity (Junghaus, n.d.). Roma contemporary art is discussed as a way to challenge and resist unequal power structures which result from "asymmetrical relations in economic and political power" between Roma and "majority" populations in Europe (ibid). In this way, RomaMoMA sees contemporary art production as a means of overcoming the ways in which political discourse frames issues like housing access, education segregation, and employment and healthcare discrimination as byproducts of Romani culture rather than larger social issues.

Yet, in line with the critiques discussed in the literature review chapter of ERIAC, the institution out of which RomaMoMA grew, some experts are skeptical of the ability of a project like RomaMoMA to forge meaningful paths to advocacy and activism that mobilize those most on the margins and most impacted by the above issues. Several of my interviewees discussed skepticism over the capacity of contemporary art in general to provide avenues for overcoming social issues. An expert in contemporary art and curation who I interviewed, referred to here as Zsuzsa, sees projects like RomaMoMA as "small steps" in the discussion of decolonization and postcolonial approaches to issues in Hungary, but emphasized that, unfortunately, "it's a discussion within a more intellectual context and it stays within the wall of the art scene and museums." Katalin Timár, senior curator and museologist at the Ludwig Museum of Contemporary Art who I interviewed, agreed. When asked to comment on contemporary art's

capacity to facilitate social change, she had concerns. “For me,” she argued, “it’s very naïve to think that art can do anything about it [anti-Roma discrimination] because already the audience that comes, for instance, to the museum is more open-minded or… they often have a little bit of experience with contemporary art, so it's not that difficult to convince them.” These sentiments were echoed in my first interview with an expert in heritage studies, social history, and representation and identity. Anna, mentioned above, expressed her concern over using contemporary art to address general society. Citing a lack of education in Hungary about contemporary art, Anna raised the issue of a general audience’s access to contemporary art and thus its significance as a tool for resistance. Even in a capital city like Budapest, she argued, “you may not be able to get a huge buzz within the city… so I’m not sure how many political achievements you can reach.” Reflecting Zsuzsa’s and Timár’s comments, Anna continued, “I have this feeling of those who are going to contemporary art exhibitions or theater pieces or anything within the capital, they are mostly very open people. So, for them, you do not need to seduce them to be open and get to know Roma people, because I think they are the ones who are the most informed about Roma culture, or about anything else in terms of contemporary art.” In sum, access to contemporary art itself, rather than discrimination of Roma artists represented in contemporary art, appears to be the biggest barrier for artists’ abilities to communicate social issues through visual art, regardless of their ethnic, national, or cultural background.

Projects like RomaMoMA and RomArchive, in existing in an online, virtual, even “nomadic” space, attempt to overcome this issue of accessibility given the flexibility and near ubiquitousness of the internet. Even so, virtual projects are not impervious to some of the concerns raised about art institutions as sites of representation. Timár also brought up the issue of inclusivity in her critique of a platform like RomaMoMA. The “idea to create a RomaMoMA is also about inclusion/exclusion, and it will eventually exclude a less interesting or less visible Roma artist, as well. So, if there is a Roma Art Museum, even if it's virtual, it will end up excluding people,” she explained. This critique hearkens back to the issues of canonization and authenticity raised earlier. Authentic representation remains an issue because questions around who gets considered as a “Roma artist,” and whose work may be included in a Roma contemporary art canon, should one exist, need to be addressed. This, in turn, means that institutions like ERIAC, despite supporting “collaborative reflection” and “social dialogue between Roma and non-Roma communities” (RomaMoMA, n.d.) via projects like RomaMoMA,

may still replicate top-down structures for determining the capacities and trajectories of Romani activist projects by acting as gatekeepers of Roma arts and culture.

3.4.2 Resistance as creation

How, then, can artists grapple with individual expression while balancing between several, perhaps conflicting, top-down canonization processes? Despite the critiques of contemporary art as a whole, contemporary art *production* can be looked to as its own form of resistance, where it is the act itself rather than the artist's engagement with an audience which holds significance. An artist frequently mentioned in terms of resistance and art production is painter Omara (Mara Oláh). Her numerous paintings depict scenes from her life and are unique in their use of text inscribed onto the paintings themselves to communicate clear meaning and avoid ambiguity. Omara's career as an artist began later in her life in 1988 while, aged 43, she drew a portrait while suffering from a migraine and found that, once the drawing was finished, her pain had gone away (Molnar, 2023). The healing potential of art creation stands as a testament to the role of resilience in contemporary art production in Omara's life and work. In narrating her memories, traumas, and other biographical elements from her life while using text "to reflect her own unique voice, experience, and frustrations" (ibid), Omara renders the prosaic as profound in a process which defies artistic conventions yet has landed her a place in the Hungarian contemporary art canon.

Her works frequently deal with political themes or serve as social commentaries on the situation of Roma people in Hungary, for example, by depicting instances of discrimination by police or calling out politicians for discriminatory policies. One such painting, a 2014 piece entitled *Ó de sajnállak benneteket soha nem tudjátok meg mi az hogy jó embernek lenni…* (*Oh but I pity you, you will never know what it is to be a good person…)* (Figure 8) after the first line of text, goes on to describe Omara's encounter with police officers who harassed her and asked for identification while Omara was on her way to a meeting with the former Indonesian ambassador. It is overt in its representation of police as aggressors and Omara as a victim of discrimination and a societal "other." Eszter György, reflecting on the evocative power of Omara's work, discussed her approach as capable of transforming her struggles. "'You would think that I'm this foolish old lady, but I know exactly what you are doing with me,'" György elaborated, embodying Omara's perspective in her words. Omara made her perspectives and aims clear,

never shying away from her Roma identity and instead using it to provoke audiences into considering the deeper meanings attached to being Roma, held by both "majority" society and Roma individuals themselves.

Fig. 8 *Ó de sajnállak benneteket soha nem tudjátok meg mi az hogy jó embernek lenni…*

Omara | 2014 | oil on fiberboard (32.5 x 60 cm) | courtesy of Everybody Needs Art and Longtermhandstand, Budapest | source: https://post.moma.org/disrupting-the-institution-through-language-and-enactment-omaras-resistance/

Many of Omara's other works, including her series of "Blue Pictures," some of which hang in the Ludwig Museum of Contemporary Art in Budapest, are more intimate and confessional in nature, depicting her personal experiences growing up or her relationships with her family members. Two of these, *Mara első iskolás, 1952* (*Mara in the first grade, 1952*) and *Marának mégis lett új háza, 1967* (*Mara got a new house after all, 1967*) (Figures 9 and 10), illustrate how, even when the content of the painting is not an overt challenge to hegemonic power structures which discriminate against Roma people, representation within an established art institution is itself an act of resistance because it positions the Roma artist as an equal among non-Roma Hungarian contemporary artists. In this way, Omara's inclusion in the Hungarian contemporary art canon was earned by loudly and unambiguously owning her identity as a Romani woman. In opposition to Péli, who wished to be seen as a Hungarian artist, Omara's inclusion is a testament to the strength she derived in assigning meaning to her identity, which she was then able to communicate via her paintings. Although never declaring herself an activist,

as Pócsik pointed out, Omara's presence in established contemporary art institutions is an act of resistance which shifts the entire meaning of a Hungarian contemporary art canon by claiming space in it as a Roma woman. Just as Péli's *Születés* asserted the inextricable links of Roma history with Hungarian history, so does Omara's work assert the importance and value of Roma voices within Hungarian contemporary art, illustrating that one does not exist without the other.

Fig. 9 *Mara első iskolás, 1952*

Omara | 1998 | painting | source: https://www.romarchive.eu/en/collection/mara-elso-iskolas-1952/

Fig. 10 *Marának mégis lett új háza, 1967*

Omara | 2000 | painting | source: https://www.romarchive.eu/en/collection/maranak-megis-lett-uj-haza-1967/

3.4.3 Resistance as rejection

If artists like Omara can be held up as examples of resistance through creating and communicating Romani identities on their own terms, the Sostar? group serves as a counterexample, proving resistance can be an act of rejecting the responsibility to define and take a stance on the political and moral responsibilities of a Roma artist. In aiming "to change, reject, and rethink the schizophrenic conditions that, among other things, force also the group members to take on ethnicizing and moralizing roles" (André Raatzsch, 2014, quoted by Kálmán, n.d.), the Sostar? group, active from 2013-2014, attempted to address the dual burden of representing Roma identities as fluid and diverse while defining themselves as artists capable of "freely owning their European mentality" within the contemporary Hungarian art canon (ibid). "Guerilla actions" include artist András Kállai's piece at the French Institute of Budapest, where he wore a t-shirt with the words "Is it wise to categorize fine arts on the grounds of ethnic origin?" printed on it, or the group's creation ("countermaking") of a stamp reading "This is not a Roma exhibition." These have allowed the Sostar? group to communicate resistance through

rejecting the institutional workings of contemporary art which simultaneously exclude Roma artists and represent Roma art only as an ethnic category within the art canon (Kálmán, n.d.). Their stance, then, advocates for decolonization of Roma art by resisting the need to define it from non-Roma perspectives.

The Sostar? group's explicit position on the role of contemporary art and the contemporary artist in realizing processes of decolonization is a continuation of the foundation laid by predecessors like Péli and Omara. They, like Omara, never officially declared their work as activist. Yet, in aiming to "shed light on the exclusion of the Roma from the discourse on the Roma and to challenge the rigid definitions of identity" (Kálmán, n.d.), their work can be read as such. In prioritizing a performative praxis to promote social engagement and participation of audiences, Sostar? physically and discursively disrupts barriers separating Roma art and artists from non-Roma art, artists, and society. Their approach demonstrates the ability of contemporary art to forge bottom-up, diverse modes of resistance to both the "majority" hegemon and elite projects to construct Romani identities which rely on homogeneity and consolidation. Their actions and lasting legacy show that, in contrast to the way Romani identities have been consolidated and homogenized by contemporary art institutions, "majority" representations, and Romani elites, showcasing the depth, fluidity, and diversity of Roma identities can be a useful means of critically commenting on larger issues like representation and exclusion.

3.5 Conclusion

These empirical findings have engaged with the theoretical debates surrounding Roma identities, approaches to activism, and contemporary art production. They have shed light on my central research questions by addressing the diverse ways artists and activists use Romani identities in their work. While some, like artist Tamás Péli advocated for removing ethnic designations in his art entirely, others like Norbert Oláh incorporate Roma identities into their work to draw attention to the problems of classifying something as "Roma art." Still others like Omara wholly embrace self-identity as a recurring motif to highlight larger social issues faced by Roma people. This dissonance shows the pitfalls in thinking of Roma individuals, Romani movements, and Roma art in singular or reductive terms. Even so, the findings also demonstrate that "Roma contemporary art" could be a useful category for beginning to draw attention to the expectations and representations often foist upon artists of Roma origins. While contemporary art is by no

means the only avenue for expressing and realizing activist goals, it is capable of representing the diverse, complex, multifarious character of Roma identities which can then inform further activist agendas.

Conclusions

This research emerged out of the need to investigate alternative forms of Roma identity construction which made room for Roma agency, empowerment, and resistance. To do this, my research aimed to clarify how Roma activist projects have been constructed using Roma identities as a source of empowerment and, furthermore, how contemporary art has been able to instrumentalize these identities to communicate diverse forms of activism. To examine the relationships between identities, activism, and contemporary art for people who self-identify as Roma in Budapest, it asked:

- How are Roma identities instrumentalized to advance activist initiatives?
- How does contemporary art production inform, reflect, or problematize these identities?
- Is "Roma contemporary art" a useful avenue for communicating and achieving activist objectives rooted in Romani identities?
- Is activism through contemporary art capable of facilitating bottom-up, diverse initiatives or does it remain confined to the realm of the elite?
- Is it even possible to discuss such a thing as "Roma contemporary art"?

To answer these questions, I first reviewed a wide body of literature dedicated to exploring and explaining how several diverse Roma movements have constructed and instrumentalized Roma identities to forge different paths toward Roma liberation. This showed that there are two distinct approaches to constructing and maintaining Roma identities to advance activist goals. The first, embodied by the Romani movement to emerge in the 1970s and strengthen in the 1990s and 2000s after Hungary's EU accession, tends to rely on homogenous representation of Roma in order to forge a unified political identity and seek empowerment in European-wide structures, like the EU. The second is a civic approach that makes room for diversity and a heterogenous, fluid understanding of identities, seeking empowerment and liberation through more local channels and finding solidarity with other movements, like the Women's movement and LGBTQ+ activism. Drawing from postcolonial theory aided in situating processes like decolonization, intersectionality, othering, and resistance to hegemony within a discussion of activist approaches to Roma identity construction and maintenance.

After establishing this background, the opportunity opened for delving deeper into an examination of one avenue of constructing identities and activist discourse: Roma contemporary art. By first reviewing the history of Roma art and situating contemporary art production within this context, I began to address how contemporary art production informs, reflects, or problematizes the types of identities forged through activist movements. I employed a combination of visual and textual analysis of Roma contemporary art pieces and projects, and qualitative, semi-structured interviews with experts in fields related to contemporary art, Roma cultural heritage, history, and activism. The data gleaned from this dual approach revealed that the approach of artists is as diverse as Romani movements themselves. While some artists embrace a Roma identity and use it to inform their subject matter and approach, others would prefer to eschew ethnic categorizations of their art altogether. Furthermore, artists and activists may often be at odds in their understanding of the obligation of contemporary art or the contemporary artist to use art as a platform for raising awareness of pressing social issues and engaging in meaningful discussions to address them. Whereas, in general, artists tend to use their platforms to draw attention to the ways Roma art is represented and understood within the contemporary art or Hungarian art canon, activists who use art as a means of social activism often address larger issues like poverty, housing access, violence, and segregation. Both artists and activists point to decolonization, resistance, othering, and diversity (a few use the term intersectionality) within their work, either explicitly in their reflections or motifs, or implicitly in their actions and choice of subject matter. Contemporary art and activism, then, mutually feedback into one another. Activists construct various approaches to discussing and conceiving of Roma identities, while pushing back against one-dimensional representations upheld by the "majority" hegemon. Artists reflect this struggle in their work and raise further questions about identity's role and usefulness in combating discrimination and elevating Romani voices within art and broader social settings. Activists can then learn from contemporary artists' methods of communicating complex social issues through visual and participatory media.

Given this mutual relationship, I argue that Roma contemporary art is a useful avenue for communicating and achieving activist objectives rooted in Romani identities, albeit with limitations. The nature of contemporary art allows for techniques and tactics that are more accessible and, in some cases, confrontational, than other forms of art (like the naïve art category Roma artists are often placed into). Performance art, street exhibitions, "guerilla actions," and

the availability "nomadic" contemporary art exhibitions online enhances contemporary art's activist potential and means that contemporary art is not confined solely to elite or established museum institutions. However, contemporary art's capacity to facilitate bottom-up, diverse activist initiatives remains cloudy. Based on several discussions with interviewees, I argue that, at the time of this research, it is not contemporary art itself that is a main driver of diverse approaches to Romani activism. Rather, contemporary art is reflective of shifts in activism that include diverse voices, local initiatives, self-representation, and solidarity across identity categories.

Finally, in addressing the question to emerge during the process of this research, whether it is even possible to discuss such a thing as "Roma contemporary art," I would argue that the short answer is yes. If taken as a fluid category, open to changing interpretations, adaptation, and multi-dimensionality—echoing the approach taken to thinking of Roma identities by some activists—then a category of Roma contemporary art could be an avenue for expanding representation of Roma within a sphere traditionally occupied by members of the "majority." In taking on a diversity of meanings, it functions like any other canon within contemporary art. It can exist both within and alongside Hungarian contemporary art, just as Hungarian contemporary art can exist within and alongside the European contemporary art canon. If a Roma contemporary art canon should be forged, it must do so with the input of individual artists, creators, curators, and potentially activists rather than created based on top-down decisions made by art institutions.

These findings should not be viewed on their own. Just as I have argued for contextualizing Roma activist movements within an international milieu that accounts for a diverse understanding of Roma in terms of ethnicity, language, nationality, culture, and socioeconomic status, I likewise assert that this dissertation's research will benefit from further analyses that attend to other nuances. Particular attention in future studies could be given to the ways Roma representation through activism and art manifests in urban and rural settings. This research was limited in scope to Budapest, a capital city, yet it is known that contemporary art is being produced in other settings in Hungary and is done so with particular goals and objectives that may differ from those of artists working in a capital. Expanding the research focus to rural spaces would fill important gaps by discursively shifting focus to "the margins." Another research

direction could expand the understanding of intersectionality in both art and activism by devoting specific attention to the challenges and opportunities of women or LGBTQ+ artists of Roma origin.

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Appendix 1: Coding Table

Raw data	Theme(s)	Code
"So, the root of the contradiction is, I think, present in every single representation of an ethnic group, namely that it covers something, characteristic features, of that certain ethnic group, anthropologically, sociologically, whatever. And these characteristics might be present or might be not in the in the products of that certain representation. But the artists themselves always try to be part of the more universal, the broader understanding of the artistic or cultural scenes, so when someone is called the Roma artist, then we always have to think about that, that they not just belong to that ethnic group, but they belong to the much broader group of artists in Europe all over the world."	Representation, art, artists	Identity in art
"Since all these struggles and efforts for empowerment for many different ethnic groups, the issue of expressing yourself as an artist belonging to an ethnic minority became a very important political issue, so this struggle for emancipation became tightly connected to the ways of the artistic impression, expression, and the spaces where all these efforts and all these representations appear. They became very important scenes of this struggle, and in that sense, the label, or to add your origins to your art—naming—naming your belonging became a question, an issue of identity politics and also the issue of the canonization, I think."	Identification, representation, canonization	
"So when we think about this, then we can say that it's very much connected very specifically connected to Romani culture. And yet all these abstract ideas exist in our universal cultural understanding, so I think these two-sided	Representation, duality, universality	

characteristics of RomaMoMa--issues and Roma art issues--are very interesting and very important.”	
“I would point out a term here which is essentialism, and I think it's a very--it's a crucial term. In the case of Roma art because essentialism means an aspect, an approach where you always focus on things which do not change. They are very traditional, but in that sense that they have existed for hundreds of years, and they still exist and so on. So the essentialist approach to Romani culture highlights all these features. Which are connected to freedom and wandering and whatever, but these are existing characteristics of Romani history and culture. But in an essential way you just show them very schematically and pointing out the unchangeable features of them.”	Representation, essentialism
“And the same goes for Norbi Oláh, the painter who wrote this, how would you call this, not a pamphlet, but like you know, this declaration of the anxiety of a Roma contemporary artist who just raises the same questions, should he be involved as a Roma artist in Roma political debate, should he be an activist, can he neglect or can he ignore this whole field of activism? Can he just be himself without, you know, saying anything about these social questions? So I think there is not a right answer to this. I think every artist has an individual answer to it, and maybe an individual level of involvement. … I don't think that we could have a general question. So this, can you avoid being political? Or if you should be like all the time an activist and an artist at the same time?”	Identification, contemporary artist, activism, art as political statement
“Yeah, that's very interesting. And it makes me think back to what I just said about music, which seems to be the easiest way to overlap these gaps and to jump from one scene to maybe a larger scene, to an international scene. Because on the one hand it's like it's a common layer, it's like universal language that	Classification, naïve art, universality

doesn't require translation, and art or fine art or painting also doesn't need translation in a way like a theater play would need it or a movie would need it. But I think, for example, there is another aspect that we haven't raised yet, and it's the long term status of Roma art in Hungary, which is stuck in this label of 'naïve art,' which is in a way the heritage of the state socialist system, which didn't want to--because of these forced assimilatory practices and policies--they didn't use the word 'gypsy art' or 'Roma,' but they wanted to do something with this art. They didn't neglect the very existence of Roma people, so they put them into this label 'naive art.'"	
"Well, I'm sure you know about the work of Omara, of Mara Oláh, who was like also all the time in this very cynical and very funny way, but also it was also like tragic or sad, the scenes that she showed from her life, all the scenes, all the times when she was or her family was, you know, attacked in a way. She also put it in this very cynical and very progressive or, … but you know the way she transformed all these struggles into this cool way. 'Yes, I'm Mara. I'm this Roma woman who you are attacking all the time. And I'm looking, you know, you would think that I'm this foolish old lady, but I know exactly what you are doing with me.'"	Identification, transformation, self-representation
"Yeah, that's an evergreen question I think because, also, as you heard, I'm sure, that there are two schools, that one is saying that everything is Roma art, what is produced by a Roma artist, and the others are saying no, the topic is the most important, if the topic is Roma, about Roma people, that's the Roma art. But for me, as a person, I have a personal opinion--and I don't think that I'm holding the truth--but for me, Roma art is both. It's like when the artist has a Roma heritage, a Roma identity, and somehow is also addressing Roma problems. It shouldn't be	Identities in art, artist perspective, activist perspective, universality, stigma

exactly Roma problems, it can be also, as you said, as you wrote in the paper, universal issues, but somehow also cardinal for the Roma people, as well. So, if the art is, for example, about housing, it's a universal topic, but somehow if you see the contemporary situation of the Roma people, it's something really important. So for me, that's what I'm saying, that that's Roma art. And I have to tell you that there is a conflict between my point of view and the artist's point of view, because the artists for me, they are by nature and it's, there is a logic behind it, that they are more individualistic, they are thinking, you know, really individualistic and in the center it's also about their personality. And me, as an activist, I more believe in collectivism, and somehow there is a conflict between that. And I would like to mention also one fact that I also feel from Roma artists that they don't want to be put in a box, that 'I am a Roma artist,' and I can understand why is that, but I'm sad because they are not addressing the reason. Because if they would address the reason, maybe the people would understand that. Because when I'm talking with the Roma artist, they are, I feel that behind it, there is a fear that their art is not going to be that valuable as it would be from another ethnicity. Because when you are talking about, I don't know, a Russian novelist, I don't think that somebody would often be offended. 'No, I'm just a novelist. I'm just a writer. I'm not a Russian,' you see? … So there is a stigma behind it and it's a negative stigma."	
"Regarding this Roma non-Roma art this binary, this forced binary approach and we thought it was super, super important to include this in this whole prospective because this is also the kind of… so we absolutely consider that like these hidden narratives and unspoken and erased narratives regarding, for example, cultural context are as much as a trauma source than	Roma art, non-Roma art, binary, hidden narratives, trauma

other trauma sources, which are more, I mean there are no right words to call these, but I mean like are more of a topic in discussions about trauma.”		
“Like what is Roma art or what the Roma artist or are they considered as Roma or not. That also goes back to this problem, in my view of education, but not like how the Roma people are deprived of proper education or that they’re very often in segregated villages in the east of Hungary. But this idea of how art in general is taught in schools or in secondary and primary schools. And this gives most people, not just Roma people, but like Hungarians or whatever, a very old-fashioned view of what art is.”	Roma art, general perception of art, art education	
“For me, this idea to create a Roma MoMA is also about inclusion exclusion and it will eventually exclude a less interesting or less visible Roma artist as well. So if there is a Roma Art Museum, even if it's virtual, it will end up excluding people.”	Roma art, exclusion, RomaMoMA	
“Many artists are using their talents to work against stereotypes. Also, I think some of them are using the stereotypical patterns or flowers consciously of like poking, you know, the general public. So it's more a reverse or revenge tool in many hands, which I think it's good because then it's something that is, how should I say in in simple words, like something that is used against me and I turn against back. Not as a fight or something, but like I am, I don't take the offense personally, but I can make a joke about it. And I think that's very powerful because that turns down the stereotype’s negative effect, both for the community and for those who are using those stereotypes. So in terms of using stereotypes, it is not a bad thing at all. Because if you turn around and you know that it doesn't hurt, and you can play with	Stereotypes	

it, then that's your strength or the artist's strength or the community's strength. So I think it's good. But I think contemporary art is not just about stereotypes or fighting against stereotypes. There are many artists who you would not, based on their art pieces, that you would not realize that they are from the Roma community. They do not want it to be identified with and I think that's also a very eligible artistic, representational way. If I just want to be seen as one artist, full stop, without any categorization or anything else, I think it's also a valid intention."		
"So you cannot really recall any important events or, not particularly demonstrations, but artistic events or cultural events where these critical views were expressed. So I think this whole activist approach and critical approach is somehow weakened in Hungary."	Activism	Activism through art
"But you cannot talk about activism in general that it's always too much because in many cases, activism is the thing which started to and could contribute to changes and changing things. And in Hungary this activism in Romani art and the connection… It could be somehow. So when these young artists I know, for example, talk about other issues of decolonization and the other ways of oppression… so when they talk about other experiences from other parts of the world, they somehow seem to me, deliberated so they speak about it more freely than about these issues of Romani activism and political issues."	Activism, decolonization	
"Well, actually, I could call Omara's works activist, and she has never, ever declared herself activist."	Activism, contemporary art, Omara	
"For the moment, it's a discussion within a more intellectual context and it stays within the wall of the art scene museums and it's…I think it's very interesting that it's through	Activist potential of	

contemporary art that it happens the most the most outspokenly for the moment.”	contemporary art
“I am a bit skeptical, not a bit like really skeptical, about the power of art, at least here in Hungary. In this context, I think that I'm not sure what can be done, but I think that just shouldn't go on. And I mean, all these discrimination against Roma people, it's just it has, it has to be stopped and I think it's… for me, it's very naive to think that art can do anything about it, because already the audience that comes, for instance, to the museum is more open-minded or kind of they often they have a little bit of experience with contemporary art, so it's not that difficult to convince them. Also maybe cultural acceptance or inclusion is much easier than political inclusion and just not to use art to pretend that, okay there is inclusion, while in real life there is no inclusion whatsoever. Exactly the opposite. So I don't, I don't know and I'm very skeptical.”	Activist potential of contemporary art
“Unfortunately, it’s a topic for a very small group of the general society, so if you wanted to address a general problem with contemporary art in Hungary, good luck. You should know that like the whole education in Hungary really stops way before contemporary whatever is it, literature, history, art, whatever. People usually don't get the education or the view. I am happy that there are exceptions, yes, definitely, but the majority who comes out from schools and stuff, you know, they go for, I don't know, van Gogh, to Matisse, even though Matisse is nothing contemporary anymore. And if you want it, to have something contemporary, then maybe it's photography, or maybe it's, I would even argue about the theater, if you just look at the general production that can be reached or that is addressed for the general audience. Mostly very classical.	General appeal of contemporary art, access to contemporary art

Yes, there are a few new ones for classicals in modern interpretations, but it's still, it's not Berlin where you have, you know, all these very contemporary buzz that going on unfortunately.”		
“If you think about Budapest, yes, maybe that's the most vivid part of the country. But still you would not be able to get a huge buzz within the city either. So I'm not sure, based on that, how much political achievements or empowerment you can reach. I sound very pessimistic. Sorry about that. I'm definitely not against the project, I'm just, I just honestly don't know. Because I have this feeling of those who are going to contemporary art exhibitions or theater pieces or anything within the capital, they are mostly very open people. So for them you do not need to seduce them to be open and get to know Roma people, because I think they are the ones who are the most informed about Roma culture, or about anything else in terms of contemporary art. Then you should go for another group to spread the message, but then I'm not sure about the channel. “	Art in Budapest, empowerment, art’s political potential	

Appendix 2: Interview Guide

1. What are the most important components of Roma Art?
   - Why?
   - Can we even talk about "Roma Art" in the singular?
   - Can you talk about the ways art and cultural heritage might be changing?
   - How does contemporary art relate to other forms of Roma cultures/cultural heritages?

2. Do you see Roma Contemporary Art projects as addressing specifically Roma issues and concerns, or more universal issues?
   - If the former, what are these concerns?

3. Many scholars and activists have commented on the tension between heterogenous and homogenous representation of Roma identities. How do heterogeneity and homogeneity interact in Roma identity production?
   - Are heterogenous cultural representations reconcilable with homogenous political representations?
   - How does Contemporary Art confront and negotiate these challenges?

4. What role do stereotypes play in the conceptualization of Roma Contemporary Art?
   - Does Contemporary Art reinforce some stereotypes, even as it seeks to combat them?
   - Is there something specific to Contemporary Art that allows stereotypes to be addressed and challenged?

5. Can you discuss how you understand Contemporary Art's relationship to political power?
   - In what ways are the arts promoting political agency among Roma communities in Budapest?
   - How does Roma self-representation support political engagement?

6. What is the role of identity in Roma activism? How are identities understood within empowerment narratives?
   - What is the role of resilience in this?

7. As a collaborative art space, RomaMoMA claims to promote community dialogue. Can you speak about the importance of Roma people engaging with non-Roma members of the community?

8. If you could change one thing about the way non-Roma people in Hungary engage with, consume, confront, or in some way interact with Roma art and culture, what would you change?

Appendix 3: List of Interviewees

Name (or pseudonym)	*Date of Interview*	*Place of Interview*
Anna	17 November 2022	Budapest, Hungary
Eszter György	21 November 2022	Budapest, Hungary
Andrea Pócsik	19 December 2022	Budapest, Hungary
Joci Márton	19 January 2023	Budapest, Hungary
Katalin Timár	28 February 2023	Budapest, Hungary
Zsuzsa	28 February 2023	Budapest, Hungary

Appendix 4: Participant Information Sheet

College of Social Sciences

Participant Information Sheet

Study title: Cultural Heritage, Ethnopolitical Identity, and Narratives of Empowerment for Contemporary Hungarian Roma

Researcher: Bria Trosclair
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Kristina Kallas*
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Program: International Master's in Central and East European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide to take part it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask the researcher/s if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take some time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to develop a master's dissertation that explores how artists, curators, and activists use visual art and cultural heritage to construct or reconstruct ideas of Romani identity. This study also aims to determine how identity is linked to political agency, and in what ways a contemporary art project like RomaMoMA functions as a political project. The study will be carried out from September 2022-August 2023.

Do I have to take part?

Participation in this study will take the form of a one-hour interview, to be carried out over Zoom. Participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time and refuse to answer any questions.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been selected for an interview due to your contributions to the RomaMoMA Contemporary Art Project. Other contributors, artists, curators, scholars, and activists involved in these RomaMoMA are also likely to be contacted for interview.

What will happen to me?

In your interview, you will be asked to reflect on the importance of Romani cultural heritage, RomaMoMA's capacity to address both universal social concerns and those specific to Roma communities, questions of heterogenous vs. homogenous representation, the role of stereotypes in contemporary art, cultural heritage's relationship to political power, the role of Romani identity in relation to activism, and the importance of community engagement. You also have a choice whether to consent to your interview being audio recorded, as per the accompanying Consent Form.

Consent

You are being asked to partake in an interview to last no longer than one hour, to be carried out via Zoom. In your Consent Form, you may choose whether or not you wish to consent to being directly quoted in the master's dissertation. In the Consent Form, you may also provide consent to your interview being audio- and video-recorded for transcription purposes.

Your personal details will be kept confidential by allocating ID numbers when analysing data and using pseudonyms to reference any participants when writing about data, unless you provide your express written and verbal consent to be named in the Consent Form.

Confidentiality

Please note that assurances on confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered. In such cases the University may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies.

Please note also that confidentiality may not be guaranteed due to the limited size of the participant sample, as these interviews are being conducted with expert artists, curators, and activists taking part in the RomaMoMA Project, which has a limited number of involved contributors. Individuals targeted for interviews are drawn from a limited pool of people involved in the project, so you may know, work with, or have previously worked with other participants who have been solicited for interviews.

Results of Study

I will analyse the data I collect from participants and present this in the dissertation which I am writing for my qualifications, IntM in Central and East European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies and MA Political Science. All participants will receive a written summary of the findings via email, and I will also present the information to my colleagues. I will store data in a secure location on an encrypted device to which only I have access for the duration of this study. Upon completion of the study, research data will be destroyed per the protocols laid out by University of Glasgow School of Social Sciences.

This project has been considered and approved by the School of Social and Political Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow.

To pursue any complaint about the conduct of the research: contact the School of Social Sciences Lead for Ethical Review, Professor Gerda Reith: email socsci-ethics-lead@glasgow.ac.uk

Thank you for reading this.

_____End of Participant Information Sheet_____

Appendix 5: Consent Form

University of Glasgow

College of Social Sciences

Consent Form

Title of Project: Cultural Heritage, Ethnopolitical Identity, and Narratives of Empowerment for Contemporary Hungarian Roma

Name of Researcher: Bria Trosclair

Names of Supervisors: Zoltán Balázs

Kristina Kallas*

Please tick as appropriate

Yes ☐ No ☐	I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
Yes ☐ No ☐	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
Yes ☐ No ☐	I consent to interviews being audio-recorded.
Yes ☐ No ☐	I consent to interviews being video-recorded, and I acknowledge that all video data will be deleted immediately upon completion of the interview.
Yes ☐ No ☐	I consent to being named when referred to in the dissertation.
Yes ☐ No ☐	I acknowledge that I will be referred to by pseudonym unless I have provided consent to being named in the preceding clause.

Yes ☐ No ☐ I consent to direct quotes being used in the written dissertation, with appropriate attribution (either to your pseudonym or name, depending on responses to the two above clauses.)

I agree that:

Yes ☐ No ☐ All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymised.

Yes ☐ No ☐ The material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.

Yes ☐ No ☐ The material will be destroyed once the project is complete.

Yes ☐ No ☐ I waive my copyright to any data collected as part of this project.

Yes ☐ No ☐ I acknowledge the provision of a Privacy Notice in relation to this research project.

I agree to take part in this research study ☐

I do not agree to take part in this research study ☐

Name of Participant …… Signature ……

Date ……

Name of Researcher ……Signature ……

Date ……

*Original secondary supervisor Kristina Kallas withdrew from her role in May 2023 and was replaced by Heiko Pääbo as acting supervisor. At the time of ethics approval, Kristina Kallas was still supervisor, so this information has not been altered on these forms.

Appendix 6: Ethical Approval

Ethics Committee for Non-Clinical Research Involving Human Subjects

Notification of Ethics Application Outcome – UG and PGT Student Applications

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Application Details

Undergraduate Student Research Ethics Application ☐ Postgraduate Student Research Ethics Application ☒

Application Number: PGT/SPS/2022/306/CEERES

Applicant's Name: Bria Trosclair

Project Title: Cultural Heritage, Ethnopolitical Identity, and Narratives of Empowerment for Contemporary Hungarian Roma

Application Status: Fully Approved

Date of Review: 02/09/2022

Start Date of Approval 02/09/2022 End Date of Approval 31/08/2023

NB: Only if the applicant has been given approval can they proceed with their data collection with effect from the date of approval.

Recommendations (where changes are required)

Where changes are required by reviewers all applicants must respond in the relevant boxes to the recommendations of the Committee and provide this as the Resubmission Document to explain the changes you have made to the application as well as amending the documents. Changes to the application form or supporting documents should be highlighted either in block highlight or in red coloured text to assist the reviewers.

All resubmitted application documents should then be provided.

Approval Subject to Amendments means that the applicant can proceed with data collection with effect from the date of approval, but amendments must be fulfilled.

Amendments Subject to SEF should be submitted to ethics administrator.

If your application is rejected a new application must be submitted to the ethics administrator. Where recommendations are provided, they should be responded to and this document provided as part of the new application. A new reference number will be generated.

REVIEWER MAJOR RECOMMENDATIONS	APPLICANT RESPONSE

REVIEWER MINOR RECOMMENDATIONS	APPLICANT RESPONSE

ADDITIONAL REVIEWER COMMENTS	APPLICANT RESPONSE
This application has now been fully approved. Many thanks for your clear response to comments and all the best with your research.	